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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 16

The Splintered Sunglasses Affair

by Peter Leslie

The desperate hunt for a top-secret THRUSH document pits Solo and Illya against an unknown but deadly foe.

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THE SPLINTERED SUNGLASSES AFFAIR

CHAPTER ONE

A Solo Snatch

It was the slickest kidnapping they had seen in New York for ten years. At eleven twenty five, Napoleon Solo, Chief Enforcement Officer of the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, turned a handle and walked through a doorway leading to his own headquarters. At eleven twenty six, he was lying unconscious on the floor of a car heading upstate for Johnstown.

The morning was sunny, with high white clouds moving lazily across a clear sky. Earlier, it had been raining. But by the time Solo paid off his cab at the corner and walked the length of the seedy brownstone block which masked the Command's nerve center, the sidewalks had steamed themselves dry and the tires of the traffic in the street no longer hissed greasily over the patched macadam. For the middle of April, it was really quite warm.

The agent had been on a routine visit to Geneva. An all-nations conference on the drug menace had been held in one of the white hotels above the lake, and Interpol had asked U.N.C.L.E. to send a top operative who could act as observer and at the same time answer questions on some of the more advanced techniques the Command had evolved to deal with international trafficking. Alexander Waverly, the grey and lined Policy and Operations chief to whom Solo and his colleagues were responsible, had decided as a compliment to the Europeans to send his No. 1 operative. The conference being over, Solo was on his way back to base to report. Essentially a man of action, he loathed paperwork—and it was with some distaste that he rehearsed in his mind the opening paragraphs of the statement that he would shortly begin dictating to one of the personable secretaries available to his Section.

A nondescript Plymouth was maneuvering into a gap in the line of parked vehicles at the side of the roadway as he drew abreast of the misted windows of Del Florio's tailor shop.

The old man must be doing a lot of pressing this morning, Solo thought, turning towards the doorway. For a moment, as his fingers touched the smooth, worn wood of the latch, he caught sight of his own reflection—crisp, dark hair, humorous eyes below level brows, a cleft chin, the whole face still frowning a little at the thought of the report he had to make.

Then the image, and with it the section of sunny street over his shoulder, with the moving car, a wedge of blue sky above the opposite roofs, the kaleidoscope of magazines outside Sol Zimmermann's newsstand across the street, all slanted away and swung inwards as the door opened at the touch of his hand. Behind him, an unkempt man with a butt drooping from his unshaven lip put a hand on the arm of a passing businessman in an unspoken request for a light. The miniature electric bulbs of the ribbon clock above the newsstand flashed off from 11:24 and came on again to read 11:25.

Napoleon Solo walked into the shop.

The two padded halves of the pressing machine were open, although there were no garments actually on it. Behind it was a girl Solo hadn't seen before, fussing with the controls. There was a lot of steam in the air.

The old man himself was in his shirtsleeves, the inevitable tape measure around his neck, crouched down over a desk at the back of the shop.

"What's this, Del?" Solo called, grinning at the girl. "Been injecting a bit of new blood into the business while I've been away, have you?"

Above the starched white collar of her overall, the girl gave a lopsided smile and put up a hand to touch the roll of blonde hair at her neck. The old man grunted something unintelligible and hunched himself still further down over his papers. Thinking he was in one of his irascible moods, Solo shrugged affectionately, cocked an approving eye at the curves beneath the girl's overall, and walked into a fitting booth at the back of the shop. He shut the flimsy door and turned to face the wall.

Like everything else about the brownstone block of which it was the centre, the tailor shop was both more and less than what it seemed.

Behind the shabby fronts, buttressed by the public garage which completed one end of the block and the key club which was at the other, was hidden the ultra-modern complex of steel and glass and concrete housing the headquarters of U.N.C.L.E. Below the concealed masts on its roof, the world's most sophisticated communications centre kept in constant touch with a network of agents all over the earth. And through its four

entrances, day and night, streamed the cosmopolitan crowd of men and women who made up its supra-national staff. Streamed, that is, in a somewhat devious manner—for the centre is highly secret and part of the job of the run-down tenants of the brownstones (who, like the garage and club staffs, are themselves on the U.N.C.L.E. payroll) is to see that it remains so. Thus, while communications and office personnel make their way in through the washrooms of the garage, visitors enter via the key club. Certain extra-secret arrivals and departures are made by means of an underground channel leading to the East River. And Solo's men, the elite of the organization who carry out its dangerous and exacting field work, come and go through Del Florio's shop.

The middle coat hook on the back wall of the fitting booth which Napoleon Solo had entered was in fact the handle of a secret door. When it was pulled down in a certain way the wall swung inwards to reveal a short passage leading to the Command's central reception area, where a girl sat behind a desk watching miniature closed circuit TV screens which monitored the four entrances.

Solo reached up now and hauled down on the hook.

Ordinarily, conditioned by his long training and experience, his catlike alertness never relaxed. Even at home. Even when he was not on assignment.

Today, however, a little bored perhaps after a week of routine, he was a little ragged after the long transatlantic flight, and preoccupied with the problem of his report. His concentration must therefore have been slightly lower than usual. Though even the most experienced operative can be pardoned for letting up, just a little, in the entrance to his own headquarters…

Which is why between one and a half and two seconds elapsed before Solo realized that—for this one time—the hook-handle was *not* operating the secret door. And that a persistent hissing above his head was connected with a curious smell in the air.

Abruptly, the agent's reflexes snapped back into top gear. In a flash, he took in the narrow, deep cuts in the woodwork which must have severed the actuating mechanism of the door; he remembered that he had not seen Del Florio operate the overriding safety catch which controlled it and saw the tiny cylinder of gas hidden in the dead area just below the lens of the closed circuit TV camera. At the same time he saw the neat arrangement of wires

through which, by pulling down on the hook, he had himself triggered off the release of the cylinder's contents.

Desperately, he stretched out towards the container and its deadly gas. But his arms seemed abnormally heavy, his fingers thick and soft. There was a loud noise in his ears and his chest was on fire. Whirling round, he yanked furiously at the door through which he had entered.

At least, that is what his brain commanded his muscles to do, but all he achieved was a kind of shambling half turn as he lurched against the wall

It seemed quite a long time later before he identified the strange gritty feeling against his right cheek as being caused by the carpet of the booth. He must have fallen over, he thought. How odd… And how did those two pairs of shoes creep up so close to his eyes without his having noticed them? There was a high-heeled pair with pointed toes. Brown. And a bigger, black pair with blunt toecaps pricked out in a pattern of perforations.

The nearest toecap had a highlight on it. Presently the bright spot on the leather expanded. It grew bigger and bigger, swelling until it had filled the whole booth. And finally it slid in beneath Solo's eyelids and spread out inside his head, brighter and brighter, whiter and whiter, wider and wider…

The man who had been at Del Florio's desk nodded to the girl in the overall. Together they dragged Solo back into the shop, hauling him by the legs as though these were the handles of a barrow. Before they reached the street door, it opened and two men came in, moving fast and silently—a businessman in a dark suit and a Homburg hat and a rough-looking fellow with an unshaven chin. The four picked up the unconscious agent and stood just inside the open door in a compact group, holding his body between them, gazing across the sidewalk.

The Plymouth had stopped maneuvering and from the front seat somebody signalled. The nearside rear door opened.

Rapidly, the quartet carried their burden across the pavement and fed it in through the open door feet first. The girl leaned into the tonneau and pulled. The seat back hinged forward to reveal a dark cavity behind.

There was a concerted heave, and Solo disappeared from view. As the seat swung up into position again, the girl and the man from the shop climbed into the car and closed the door. The businessman and the roughneck unhurriedly crossed the road and mingled with the few pedestrians on the other side.

Equally unhurriedly, the Plymouth nosed out into the traffic stream and drew away.

The clock above Zimmermann's stand moved on to 11:26. From the moment when Napoleon Solo twisted the handle of the street door and entered Del Florio's shop to the time when the driver of the car pulled away from the curb, the snatch had taken exactly forty seven seconds.

The few passers-by who had noticed three men and a girl carrying an unconscious man across the sidewalk to a car were still staring as the Plymouth reached the intersection and caught the lights on the green. The cop coming forward to hand the driver a ticket for parking by a fire plug was still half a block away.

And by the time the girl watching the monitors in Reception had come to her senses and plunged her finger down on the alarm button, the getaway car had disappeared in the swirl of mid-morning traffic.

CHAPTER TWO

A Well-planned Affair

Irritably, Alexander Waverly tossed his pipe on to the pile of reports in the middle of his huge desk. “Why?” he exploded, spreading his arms wide in exasperation. “Why? Why? And again… why? What good is it going to do anyone in this day and age to kidnap Napoleon Solo? What’s the point?”

The briar teetered on the edge of a thick folder, overbalanced, and clattered to the surface of the desk. A twist of tobacco spilled out on to the polished wood and came to rest precisely opposite its reflection.

By the only window in the big room, Illya Kuryakin, Russian-born, naturalized American, respected equally in Moscow and Washington, stood gazing out across the river at the glittering glass column of the United Nations building. Below his high brow, the blue eyes were troubled.

“You say he was not on assignment?” he queried, swinging round to stare across the desk at his chief.

“Absolutely not. He’d been in Geneva for a week, acting as observer at a routine conference called by Interpol. I sent him there as the next best thing to a vacation.” He stared bleakly at the Russian. Waverly’s ideas on the uses of leisure were not always shared by his staff.

“You don’t think he could have… stumbled… something else while he was there?” Kuryakin asked hesitantly.

“I’m certain he didn’t. Damn it, he called me from the airport this morning”—Waverly dragged a gold watch from his waistcoat pocket and consulted the ornate dial—“less than two hours ago.”

“Then all we can do is collect every conceivable fact we have on the kidnapping itself, and work, as it were, outwards from there.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Waverly growled. “Would you like to get on with it, Mr. Kuryakin? You can have as many men as you want. Number One priority, of course, and any help you need from the FBI, the CIA, Interpol, or the New York police department.” Fumbling in the pocket of his shapeless jacket, he produced another pipe and began absentmindedly to fill

it from a stone jar which was resting on a shelf beside the door. A green light set high in the panelling above began to flash on and off.

Waverly pressed one of a row of buttons set in a platen on the desk. “Yes, Miss Riefenstahl?” he called. “What is it, please?”

The girl’s voice was deep and musical, with just a trace of accent. It came from a concealed speaker behind a bookcase. “Excuse me to interrupt, but you did say to tell you… Lieutenant Trevitt of the local precinct house is here.”

“Have him come in, please.”

“Right away, sir.”

U.N.C.L.E.‘s Head of Policy and Operations looked up and caught Illya Kuryakin’s eye. “It’s ridiculous!” he burst out, stabbing the stem of the half-filled pipe forward like an accusing finger. “Our own Chief Enforcement Officer, our star operative, snatched from under our very noses, practically inside our own HQ. It’s… it’s… almost indecent. I cannot think how Mr. Solo could have fallen for such a… It’s most embarrassing. Most.”

“You haven’t actually given me the details of the kidnapping” the Russian reminded him gently.

“Eh? What’s that? Oh… well, it was simple enough, in all conscience. Somebody tricked Del Florio’s assistant into going to an uptown apartment block to collect some stuff for pressing. Of course it was a decoy call: there was nobody there to collect from. While he was away, they came to the shop, knocked out the old man and stowed him below the counter, and then put in a ringer.”

“A… ringer?”

“Somebody to impersonate him. Someone sufficiently like him to pass muster in the shadows at the far end of the shop, with his back to the door. There was a girl, too. A blonde in a white overall.”

“Is Mr. Del Florio all right?”

“Yes—apart from a sore head. But he can’t help us much. Apparently *he* was at the back of the shop, and they slugged him from behind. Can’t remember a thing after his assistant left on that phony call.”

“None of our people coming in and out noticed anything of all this?”

“According to the reports, it was exceedingly well timed.” Waverly picked out a paper from the top folder. “Let’s see … Goldstein went out at 11:03. Del Florio and his assistant were both there then, definitely. He talked with them. Pasquali came in at 11:19—and he’s fairly sure the old

man was there, though he didn't notice the assistant. But in any case the door from the booth to Reception must have been working properly, because he used it. Yet by the time Solo arrived six minutes later, at 11:25, the substitution had taken place and the trap had been set. They must have moved in the moment Pasquali was through."

"What did they actually do, sir?"

"Fixed up a neat little device. There was a small canister of gas lodged underneath, but out of range of, the lens of the monitor camera. The door controls were cut—and when Solo, suspecting nothing, pulled on the hanger, he actuated a plunger which pierced the nozzle of the gas cylinder and released the stuff. Finish."

"Finish? You don't mean it was…?"

"No, no. According to our lab boys it was only one of the instantaneous nerve gases—something similar to the stuff we use on our sleep darts. It would knock him out for an hour or so, that's all."

"Thank goodness far that!" Kuryakin looked relieved. "There's something I can't understand though: even if the canister was out of TV range, why didn't the girl in Reception see them fixing it? They must have been in shot the whole time, surely?"

"That's something we are looking into right now," Waverly said grimly.

There was a knock on the door. A soft-bodied blonde with her hair gathered on the nape of her neck by a large black bow undulated into the room. She was followed by a stockily built man with a crew cut and large shoes. "Lieutenant Trevitt," she announced. She smiled once and left.

Waverly shook hands and introduced the plainclothes man to Kuryakin. "Tell us what you've found out, Lieutenant," he said. "This is a blow to us—almost as much to our pride as to our affections. The sooner we have Mr. Solo back with us the better."

The policeman looked at the floor. "Tell you the truth, sir," he said, "not very much really. Your security chief seems to have it doped out right. Decoy call. Attack on the old man. Substitution of two members of the gang. Then they rush your man to the getaway car after he has himself pulled the handle to release the gas that knocked him out. Very smart."

"Quite. Any leads, Lieutenant?"

"Not too many. Four people carried your man to the car, according to an eyewitness. Must have been another couple of them hanging around outside the shop, I guess."

“Eyewitnesses? How many of them?”

“Just the one, I’m afraid—so far as the actual snatch is concerned. Middle-aged woman bringing a suit of her husband’s to be altered. At least, she’s the only one who’s come forward. Must have been others, a sunny day near lunch time, but we haven’t located them yet.”

“She got a good view of them?—the kidnappers?”

“Yes, but the descriptions aren’t worth a dime. Blonde girl in a white overall. Silver-haired guy in his shirtsleeves. City gentleman dressed to kill. And a bum. Could be thousands answering those descriptions in this precinct alone.”

Waverly sighed. The lines on his grey face seemed to have etched themselves in more deeply still. “I suppose you’re right. What about the car? Did she notice that?”

“Not to say notice. She thought there were two men—two *other* men, that is—in the front seat. But that’s all she could say. We do have another witness to the auto itself, though—from the other side of the street.”

“Who? Did they notice the kidnapping as well as the car?”

The Lieutenant pulled a folded paper from his breast pocket, opened it, and flicked his eyes briefly over the pencilled notes with which it was covered. “Zimmermann. Sol Zimmerman. Guy about fifty, runs the newsstand right across the street. Didn’t see anything of the snatch, but he noticed the car because it was hovering about, trying to decide whether or not to park by a fire plug… and he knew the patrolman was due at any moment.”

“The patrolman notice the car?”

“Yes, sir, he did. And his description tallies with Zimmermann’s—so far as it goes. But he was too far away to see much. He was hurrying up to slap a ticket on them when they pulled away.”

“What make of car was it?”

Trevitt spread his arms helplessly and shrugged. “One of the family ones you don’t notice. A Plymouth or a Chevy. Maybe even a Dodge. A pale color: light blue, grey, biscuit. Might have been a silver that’d got very dusty, Zimmerman thought. But what’s the point? You’ve lost that sort of car the moment it’s past the first intersection. Hopeless. Mind you, we’ll try, of course. But… ” He shrugged again as his voice tailed away.

“Did either of those witnesses notice whether all four of the kidnappers joined the two men in the car?” Illya Kuryakin asked suddenly.

“Funny you should say that. The man from across the road didn’t see. But the woman thought only a couple of them got in. She reckoned two of the men crossed the road—but then again she’s not certain.”

“I see. No leads yet on the canister, the wires, anything like that?”

“Not yet. The decoy phone call was made from a public booth in a saloon up in the East Forties—but that’s about all we’ve turned up so far.”

“Never mind,” said Mr. Waverly. “We’ll see what our chief of security has to say.” He thumbed the button on his desk again. “Miss Riefenstahl? Has Mr. McGrath arrived yet?”

“Yes, with Miss Marsh.”

“Good. Have them come in at once.”

The blonde with the black hair ribbon tapped lightly on the door and ushered in a frail-looking redhead who had obviously been crying. With her was Jim McGrath, the 40-year-old ex-FBI man responsible for the internal security of the building. Behind rimless glasses, his eyes were angry.

“I don’t know what to say, sir,” he began. “I… it’s unbelievable! Right on our doorstep! Practically *inside* the place! Marsh here was on Reception. How she failed to give the alarm earlier, I cannot imagine.”

Waverly looked expectantly at the girl.

“I didn’t know,” she burst out. “I *was* watching the monitor, honest. I saw Mr. Solo come in and reach for the handle. Then he seemed to… well, sort of stagger. I thought he’d been taken ill—kind of like a faint or something. Then Mr. Del Florio came in… at least I thought it was Mr. Del Florio… with a girl in a white overall.”

“Well?”

The redhead hesitated. She stared at the edge of Waverly’s desk and sniffed. “Gee, it’s the last thing, the very last thing that I’d want… but I thought… I thought it was a nurse, you see. I’d of reported it but I never thought of sounding the alarm. They took him back into the shop and… and it was then that I remembered: nurses aren’t *there* already when a person’s taken ill. You have to send for them. So I sounded the alarm, but of course by then it was too late.” The girl was weeping again, the tears coursing silently down her cheeks and floating off the mascara beneath her eyes.

“That is perhaps understandable—if not forgivable,” Waverly said severely. “What we want to know more about is the previous shambles.”

“The previous…?”

“Miss Marsh,” he glared, “a device was fixed up in that booth. It was intended to render Mr. Solo unconscious. It succeeded. But it must have taken several minutes to put in place. During that time the person or persons engaged on the operation must have been in full view of the monitor camera. You were watching it. What explanation have you to offer for failing to take action on that?”

The redhead swallowed. “I guess it must have been a few minutes before.”

“It was. Between 11:19 and 11:24.”

“Yes, sir. Well, I saw Mr. Del Florio… was Mr. Del Florio… aware he was doing something there; I could see him out of the corner of my eye—”

“Out of the corner of your eye!” Waverly shouted. “You’re employed to *watch* those monitors, not see them out of the corner of your eye.”

“I know, sir. I know. Don’t you think I haven’t reproached myself a hundred times in the last hour? But there was this other commotion I was watching on Number One, you see.”

“Commotion? What commotion?”

“Some nut tried to force his way in through the staff entrance in the garage,” McGrath interrupted. “When they wouldn’t let him by, he got violent and tried to start a fight. I went there myself to sort it out.”

“The classic diversionary tactic on the opposite flank,” Waverly mused. “There’s been some planning here! Why wasn’t I told of this before?”

“It’s all in the reports, sir. On your desk.”

Waverly stirred the pile of papers and folders contemptuously with the stem of his pipe. “Reports, reports!” he snapped.

“I want action. The man who staged this decoy routine—you let him go, I suppose?”

“I’m afraid so, sir. Threatened him with an action for trespass and threw him out. It’s standard procedure, sir. Of course, if we’d known…”

The Head of Policy and Operations growled something unintelligible. He shot the girl from Reception a sudden glance from under his eyebrows. “You know what this means?’ he rapped.

The redhead gulped. She nodded. “I understand sir,” she said in a low voice. “But I swear I’d no idea. Truly…”

“Quite so. Miss Marsh. You’d better go and wait in Personnel, in case Mr. McGrath or the Lieutenant have any further questions they want to ask you. We can attend to the formalities later.”

“What do you think?” the policeman queried after the sobbing girl had left. “You know your staff. Was she in on the deal? Had someone got at her, persuaded her to take a bribe, look the wrong way for five minutes?”

“I don’t know,” Waverly replied. “I’m inclined to think not. The screening is pretty tough here. But she has to go, of course. That’s standard procedure, too. We simply can’t afford to take chances… and even if we had the time to check it out, you can never be a hundred per cent sure of anyone after a thing like that. Not a hundred per cent.”

“I guess not,” Trevitt said, “Now how shall we handle this, sir? The main thing, naturally, is to get your man back. We’ve put out a call on the car, of course…”

“I’m leaving the outside angle to you. Lieutenant,” Waverly cut in. “You’re better equipped for it than we are. But since you don’t hold out much hope of identifying the vehicle—which may have been stolen anyway—I imagine the best, if not the only, lead has to come from the scene of the—ah—snatch itself. We’ll handle things inside the building: the Reception affair, checking on who knew Solo was coming, the diversion at the other entrance, and so on. Mr. Kuryakin here is in overall charge of the operation. I suggest the two of you liaise on the most promising aspect of the enquiry: the events inside Del Florio’s and on the pavement outside.”

The Russian nodded. “I’ll put a dozen men on the inside stuff,” he said. “Mac, you can handle that, can’t you?… You’d better keep an open line between your office and the squad room at the precinct house… Lieutenant, should we start, do you think, by talking to Sol and Del Florio and your lady witness again? We might be able to get something more definite on that getaway car.”

The policeman nodded and walked to the door. “Let’s go,” he said. “Del Florio’s still in hospital and the dame’s with my boys down at the station. But we let Zimmermann stay on at his stand. There’s nobody to take over and he can’t afford to lose the regular business.”

Outside, they stood at the edge of the sidewalk waiting for a gap in the lunchtime traffic so that they could cross the street. Trevitt waved cheerily to the news vendor. Zimmermann himself, two hundred and forty pounds of blue-chinned geniality sweating in the sun, shouted back something incomprehensible as he flourished a bottle he had produced from under the counter.

“He’s a character, that one,” Trevitt said with a crooked smile. “No, wait a minute: he’s going too fast. Those *cab* drivers!”

Kuryakin nodded absently. “Tell me. Lieutenant,” he asked, “what are the chances of our getting a lead on this car—assuming Mr. Zimmermann can tell us something a little more… definite?”

The policeman studied the lock of tow-colored hair the breeze was stirring from the Russian’s forehead. “Special friend of yours, isn’t he?” he replied. “If you want a straight answer, I’d say absolutely nil… Come on. We can make it now, before that truck—Look *out*!”

Automobiles, cabs, trucks, buildings wheeled about Illya’s head as he spun to the macadam, propelled by a violent thrust between the shoulder blades. The crump of the explosion was drowned in the clatter of his own feet as he went down.

Three distinct impressions struck him as he caught his breath and sat up, one arm raised instinctively to cover his face; the smell of warm tar from a hand pitted by contact with the gritty surface of the roadway; the sight of the familiar plaster dust and cordite cloud; the sound of a car howling away in the indirect gears. It was only later, when the ringing in his own ears had stopped, that he noticed the woman screaming. Lieutenant Trevitt levered himself up from the ground with the palms of his hands. He shook his head like a dog leaving the water. “Too late,” he panted. “Too late by the width of a street, dammit!” Scowling, he stared after the car from which the bomb had been thrown—a pale-colored, nondescript sedan hurtling towards the intersection by the garage.

As the lights flashed from green to red, the sedan swerved out from behind a truck, pulled across to the left-hand side of the road, and rocketed past the line of slowing cars to take the junction across the surge of oncoming traffic. Over the outraged hooting of the other drivers, they heard the squeal of its tires as it lurched into a side street on the far side of the road. Kuryakin was staring at the opposite pavement. “So far as you and I are concerned,” he said shakily, “I should say it was too *early* by the width of a street…”

Through the dust, the splintered remains of the newsstand pierced the air like the spars of a sinking ship. Above the glass littering the sidewalk, thousands of pinups ripped by the explosion from Zimmermann’s girlie magazines were still fluttering down through the spring sunshine like the leaves of some bizarre September Song. There was a great deal of blood.

But of the man with the bottle himself, the witness who might have been able to give them some more definite information on the car in which Napoleon Solo had been abducted, nothing recognizable remained.

CHAPTER THREE

Back To Square One

The atmosphere in Waverly's office was gloomy. Illya and Lieutenant Trevitt sat uneasily on one side of the big desk while the head of Section One's Policy and Operations department paced up and down on the other.

"Twice in one day!" Waverly barked. "I'm not blaming you personally, mind, but after a couple of body blows like that, one begins to doubt the capabilities of the whole organization. It's too much. It really is too much!"

After an uncomfortable silence, the policeman cleared his throat. "Still no news from the—ah—the other side?" he asked. "No ransom notes, no threatening telephone calls, no attempts to bargain?"

"Nothing. And now I don't imagine there will be anything. In my experience," Waverly said oracularly, "the kind of kidnapper who abducts because he wants to use the missing person as a bargaining counter—whether for a sum of money or not is a detail—such a person usually makes his play almost at once. While the relatives or associates are still reeling from the shock, as it were."

"And you think that, because we haven't heard by now, we never shall?"

"I think we never shall *in that sense.* In other words, I believe Mr. Solo was abducted for reasons other than the one I have mentioned."

"But what reasons could they have, whoever they are?" Illya objected. "Napoleon was not on assignment. If there's no intention of demanding money against his safe return, what could be the point of the operation?"

Waverly slumped into his swivel chair and picked up the pipe he had thrown down among the files and reports that morning. Irritably, he ferreted about among the scattered papers for a book of matches. "Let's look at this objectively," he said at last. "Forget our personal feelings for Mr. Solo. Examine the facts: a top operative for an international organization devoted to the maintenance of law and order is kidnapped. Item, the crime was committed, prima facie, by those who are against law and order Now

customarily persons are kidnapped for one of five reasons: to make them talk; to prevent them from talking; to stop them doing or completing something; to stop somebody else from doing those things—or to *make* somebody else do something, whether it be to pay a sum of money or follow a certain course of action. Item, since Mr. Solo is not on assignment, we can discount, I imagine, the second, the third, and the fourth of those categories. We are left with the proposition that he was kidnapped either to allow some person or persons unknown sufficient opportunity to persuade him to talk; or so that his capture can be used to blackmail us into some course we would not normally entertain."

"But you yourself said the last possibility was remote, since we have received no kind of 'ransom' demand," intervened Kuryakin.

Waverly picked up the twist of tobacco which had earlier spilled on to his desk and dropped it into the bowl of his pipe. "It's unlikely," he said, "but it is possible." He rammed the tobacco home with his thumb and jammed the pipe into his mouth.

"But if your man isn't working on a case at the moment," said Trevitt, "what would anyone want him to talk *about?* Specifically, I mean."

"That suggests a number of alternatives," Waverly said. "Finding the answer would depend on knowing exactly who it was that had got him. We have a double choice for this—either the wrongdoers of the rest of the world; or—Thrush."

"Thrush?" The Lieutenant looked at him inquiringly.

"Thrush. A consortium of evil, Lieutenant. Little known, but deadly just the same. In brief, a conspiracy of financiers, scientists, industrialists and criminals who employ their unlimited funds and their not inconsiderable intelligence in a persistent attempt to take control of the world." Waverly struck a match and held it aloft.

Illya Kuryakin repressed a smile. His chief possessed an apparently inexhaustible supply of pipes, which he was always filling. Indeed, Waverly's pipes were one of the Command's favorite in jokes. But, however many he filled, it was rare indeed for any of his staff to see him actually smoke one. If, as now, a lighted match even approached the bowl, it was a sure sign that the old man was more than usually perturbed.

"But we must not guess," Waverly was going on. "Let us examine the data and see what conclusions we can fairly draw. Our antagonists have already killed once to stop the possibility—not the certainty, remember—of

our being given information leading to the getaway car. Item, either they are exceptionally ruthless, or the fact that they have Mr. Solo is of paramount importance to—Blast!"

He dropped the remains of the match into an ashtray, took the pipe from his mouth to lay it on the desk, and sucked his scorched finger.

"While we're on the subject, sir," Trevitt interjected tactfully, "may I ask one or two questions—about the conditions surrounding the snatch, that is?"

"By all means."

"I take it that we are agreed that, at least as far as entrances and exits go, the kidnappers must have been familiar with your security set-up?"

"Intimately."

"Does this imply an inside accomplice to you, then?"

"Not necessarily. Lieutenant. You're thinking of the girl again, I suppose. But although we're pretty strict on the secrecy angle, we do have visitors, you know—quite often. Army officers and police officials from various countries, people from the Pentagon, operatives from the CIA, the Deuxieme Bureau, the FBI, MI6, the MVD. Even journalists, sometimes.

"Any of them could have pieced together enough to plan the kidnapping and the diversion which preceded it, once they'd been here a few times. It's not even beyond the bounds of possibility that one of the less reputable intelligence agencies could kidnap a man like Mr. Solo—if they thought he had information which might help them against an adversary."

"After all," Illya put in, "all they needed to know was the fact that operatives entered through Del Florio's shop, that there was another entrance through the garage, and that a single person monitored the closed-circuit TV covering *all* the entrances. The details of how Del Florio's worked they could learn in time by becoming customers… once they knew was something there to look for."

"Ah, yes. The entrances. There are just the four you've told me about. Is that right?"

Waverly coughed. "That is correct," he said after a moment's hesitation. "Just the four."

Illya grinned inwardly again. Nobody had ever seen him use it, but it was widely believed in U.N.C.L.E. that there was in fact a fifth entrance, known only to Waverly himself. If there was, it was staying a secret, obviously!

“And, if you don’t mind telling me,” Trevitt continued, “how about the security arrangements once you’re in? These things, for example.” He fingered the triangular white badge pinned to his own lapel.

“Once you’re in,” Waverly echoed, “they’re tight. Very tight indeed. The badges, now: there are three different colors. Red, which restricts the wearer to the entrance floor, where we only carry out routine work. Yellow, for people allowed on that floor and also up to Communications, on the second. And white, which permits the wearer to visit any floor.”

“When you say ‘restricts’…?”

“I mean just that. The badges are sensitized by a chemical on the fingertips of the receptionist who pins them on you. Once it has been transferred to the badge, the chemical will activate an alarm system immediately that badge ventures higher than its color coding permits.”

“And if, say, a red badge does try and make the second floor…?”

“Once it passes the marker beam defining the limits of Red Badge territory, winking alarm lights flash on every desk in the building, bells ring, steel doors drop from the ceilings and seal off the section housing the intruder. It’s quite a performance.”

“Sounds pretty watertight, in every sense of the word! These badges are worn by everyone?”

“Everyone. Personnel and visitors alike.” Waverly indicated the white shields ornamenting his own and Kuryakin’s lapels. Above his head, the glass bulb set high on the panelled wall began to pulse green.

“What is it, Miss Riefenstahl?” Waverly called crossly, pressing the desk button. “I particularly asked not to be disturbed.”

“I am very sorry to interrupt, sir, but the precinct house people are calling Lieutenant Trevitt. They said to say it was very urgent.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry…. Lieutenant, would you care to take it at my desk?… The white telephone, please. Miss Riefenstahl.”

As Trevitt began to speak, Waverly moved round and dropped into a chair next to Illya. “All this… fuss… made me forget your own assignment,” he murmured. “Is there anything to report?”

“Yes, indeed,” Kuryakin replied. “Leonardo’s come up with something far better than I had hoped for. He’s got the list!”

“He made it! Splendid fellow!… Not a list detailing every Thrush satrap in Europe, I suppose? That would be too much to hope for.”

“I’m afraid so, sir. No such list exists anyway, he tells me. One would have to be compiled specially from masses of other material, and he simply didn’t have the time. What he did find was a complete list of every company and organization in Western Europe that was *destined* to become a Thrush satrap—a blueprint of their advance plans in that particular theatre of operations. With this information, we can alert managements and the security organizations of the various countries, blocking the Thrush infiltration and takeover technique before it starts. It’ll put back their European expansion schedule by two or three years.”

“But that’s excellent, excellent!” Waverly enthused. “Leonardo is to be complimented… Er, you *are* sure the list is authentic?”

“Absolutely. He got it from the private safe of the Supreme Council member for Southern Europe.”

“Do they know we have it?”

“Leonardo thought not. He cracked the safe, took out the list and photographed it, and put it all back again and locked up while the man was having dinner.”

“Good. When do we get the photographs?”

“I’m not sure, sir. Leonardo’s daily transmission was fading and he went off the air just as he was about to tell me. I’m waiting for his normal routine report this evening to find out.”

“No doubt we shall receive them through the usual channels either tomorrow or the day after. Microdot, are they?”

“No, sir. He was using a new technique. He was…” Kuryakin’s voice tailed off as Trevitt put the receiver back on its cradle. The policeman’s face was white.

“You’re right about them being ruthless,” he said tightly. “That was my Captain. Our woman witness… she was sitting having a cup of coffee with the boys in the squad room. They got her—in there! Some guy on the roof of an apartment house right across the street. They think he must have had an express rifle. Drilled her through the head—a downward deflection of nearly forty degrees… and the slug had to pass through double-glazed windows with bars over them!” He shook his head in disbelief. “She died instantly.”

There was a grim silence. Waverly scraped another match to life, tossed the empty book into the wastepaper basket, held the match in mid-air for a moment and then, finding that there was no pipe for it to ignite, dropped it

into the ashtray. “One damned thing after another,” he said. “So, since neither Del Florio nor his assistant can tell us anything, we’re back where we started: without a single lead to follow.”

“Not quite, sir. The car—or one just like it—has been traced. A pale grey Plymouth has been found abandoned on the perimeter of a private airfield just outside Johnstown, in upper New York state. The lab boys are still working on it, but they’ve already found a special compartment between the back seat and the trunk in which they think your man must have been hidden while he was ferried up there.”

“We shall just have to wait and see what else they can tell us, then,” Waverly said. “But at least we can be fairly certain of one thing.”

“What’s that?” Kuryakin and the policeman asked together.

Picking up the pipe from the desk, the lean, grey man with the tired face ticked off points against his fingers with the stem. “One, no ransom demand has arrived. Two, Mr. Solo appears to have been removed by aircraft, which presupposes both a big deal and a long-term one. Three, since he was not on assignment, it seems unlikely, as we have said, that he was—er—snatched either to prevent him completing something or to force information on a specific mission from him. Because, four, adversaries well enough informed to have planned the kidnap, and to have removed the witnesses in the way they did, would certainly know also where Mr. Solo had been and why… which is to say they must have known he was *not* on assignment.”

Waverly paused and reversed the pipe, clicking the stem into place between his teeth. “It seems, in fact,” he continued slowly, “as though Mr. Solo has been abducted at this particular time precisely *because* he is not engaged on a mission. And you can make of that what you like… Could either of you gentlemen oblige me with a light, please?”

CHAPTER FOUR

The Velvet Glove Approach

It was the only possible answer, Napoleon Solo thought. He must have been kidnapped on his way back from that dreary conference, in the way that he had been, precisely *because* he wasn't on assignment. But why? What were his captors hoping to get out of it? What was the point?… And what kind of captivity was this, anyway?

For the hundredth time, he shook his head in puzzlement. His reasoning had followed exactly the same line as Waverly's, and he had arrived at the same conclusion. Solo, however, had a lot more facts and impressions to go on—even though they didn't take him any nearer the solution of the mystery. He remembered clearly the stupefaction with which he had heard the unexpected hiss of escaping gas; he recalled the mortification he had felt when his drugged muscles refused to obey the commands of his brain, the widening highlight on somebody's shoe. But after that there was a timeless period of blankness broken only by sensations of movement, of being bounced about on a hard floor in a confined space, of being lifted, of the assault of pressure on the eardrums. Once, he had a confused idea that he had been woken from a deep sleep in an aeroplane in the middle of the night. There had been a roaring all around him and the sense of floating in a void. Then cold fingers had pulled up a fold of skin on his arm and there had been a stinging sensation before he fell asleep again. He could see the mark of the hypodermic now, just in the bend of the elbow, and the joint was still sore. After that, he remembered nothing at all until his awakening in this house, in this room, in this bed.

Since his initial return to consciousness, though, there was a host of impressions to sift in his mind. He had sat up in the unfamiliar room, hearing nothing but the slow pounding of blood through his own veins. He was wearing striped pajamas in green and brown and purple. There were silk sheets on the bed and the room was floored with parquet surrounded by walls covered in damask. On one of the petit-point chairs, his clothes were

neatly laid out. It looked like the bridal suite of a very expensive Victorian hotel, or the guest room of an oil man's Park Avenue house.

Solo had swung his feet to the floor and attempted to stand up. Apart from an odd giddiness, there seemed to be nothing wrong with him.

Experimentally, he trod the Bokhara rugs to the window embrasure. A tug at the broad, tasselled cord hanging to one side had soundlessly drawn back the midnight-blue velvet drapes. Outside it had been daylight, with sunshine splashing the shadows of a row of poplars across a lawn down below. Solo had tried the bedroom door. Astonishingly, it had been unlocked. Outside was a wide, carpeted passage leading to a gallery encircling a huge hall.

Hastily drawing on his clothes, he had tiptoed out and down the shallow staircase to the floor below. Once he had walked a few paces, the giddiness had disappeared. Through double doors at the far end of the hall, he could see formal gardens stretching away towards a copse.

He had seen nobody and heard nothing. Feeling like a man in a dream, he had walked out through the doors on to a flagged terrace.

The place was enormous. A rambling two-storied house covered with creeper; stables and coach-houses; a servants' wing with kitchen gardens attached; rose gardens, sunken gardens, topiaries. Beyond one lawn fringed with cedar trees he came to a sweep of parkland. At the far side of this was a high wall marking the boundary of the property. And about ten yards inside the wall was a six-foot wire fence beaded here and there with green glass insulators.

Between the fence and the wall the ground had been cleared and two giant dogs—Doberman Pinschers, Solo thought—halted their promenade to stare coldly at him with huge yellow eyes.

Nearer to the electrified fence, he had come abruptly upon a man in a sharp brown suit and pointed shoes leaning against the bole of a tree. There was a matchstick between his teeth and cradled negligently in his arms was the unmistakable outline of a Belgian FN machine pistol.

"Good afternoon," the agent said. "My name is Solo. I appear to be your prisoner. Could I perhaps know why?"

The gunman shifted the weapon to a more comfortable position in the crook of his right arm, removed the match with his other hand, and spat. He neither looked at Solo nor replied to his question.

The man from U.N.C.L.E. tried again. “Look,” he said “Obviously I’m not going to try and make a break for it—not with a fence that’s electrified, killer dogs on patrol, and a professional torpedo about a foot away! You lose nothing by just talking… or if you won’t talk, maybe you could tell me when will somebody show up who *can* talk?”

The expressionless eyes had swept incuriously over him, but again the guard said nothing and finally had resumed the contemplation of the middle distance that Solo had interrupted. The agent had shrugged and turned back towards the house. Making a wide circle round the place, he had caught sight of several pairs of dogs between the fence and the wall. Also, he had come across three other men similarly armed. But they would not talk either.

Now, upstairs in the bedroom again, he pondered the situation. He had been kidnapped in a quick and exceedingly well-planned raid. He had been brought to this place—and obviously whoever had arranged the visit meant to keep him there. For he was under no illusions that despite the unlocked bedroom door, the lack of direct surveillance, the relaxed atmosphere of monied ease which pervaded the property, any attempt to escape would mean his death as surely as if he had stepped into a bath holding an electric fire. The dogs, the fence, the gunmen, all proved that; despite the fact that he was apparently free to come and go as he pleased within the grounds. And they proved, too, that whoever arranged this was a very big-time operator indeed….

The only thing was why should such a person want him here? No doubt he would find out soon enough, when the crunch came. For this was a prison even though it had no bars. In the meantime—where *was* the place?

Once more he looked out of the window. The sun was sinking. Beyond the wall, lush, silvery meadows stretched into a distance barred at intervals with ranked hedgerows and trees. Here and there in the hollows, he could see patches of osiers, and there were two farms, groups of long, low buildings in mellow, rose-colored brick surrounded by poplars. Far away, a range of hills smudged an uneven line against the pale sky.

It was a scene familiar and yet somehow entirely alien.

Where could they have brought him? Solo thought again. Presumably, if they had really flown, it must be some distance from New York. Could it be Vermont? Southern Ohio? Wisconsin?

He shook his head. It could have been, but somehow he was sure it wasn't. Yet it was certainly not a landscape from the West Coast or even the South. He gazed out over the pastoral scene yet again, seeking some clue among the trees which drowsed in the approaching dusk.

"Do you prefer places to people, Mr. Solo?" a voice asked softly behind him.

Solo swung round. The girl was leaning against the wall just inside the bedroom door. She was wearing jodhpurs and a blazing yellow shirt. Beneath jet black hair, the even tan of her face glowed against the crimson damask. Her lips were full and sensuous, and the figure swelling from below the open neck of her shirt was as ripe as a cherry.

The agent smiled. "I'm afraid you have the advantage of me," he said.

"Eriksson, Lala Eriksson," the girl replied. "I hope you are comfortable. Please consider yourself perfectly free to come and go as you like within the house and grounds—though perhaps I should say there are… reasons… why a perfect guest should not decide to stray beyond the boundaries of his host's—er—hospitality."

"I have seen the dogs and the fence and the professional killers."

"So. You have already been out. Good. You will perhaps then—"

"What I want to know is why I'm here," Solo interrupted brusquely.

Lala Eriksson was carrying a plaited leather riding crop. She tapped it impatiently against the whipcord curve of her calf.

"All in good time, Mr. Solo," she said. "All in good time. In the meantime, I am sure you must agree that your confinement is hardly… oppressive. So far as motives and reasons go, no doubt Mr. Carlsen will enlighten you in due course."

"Mr. Carlsen?"

"Your host. He will be back later. Unfortunately, he had to go into the city ."

"What city?"

The girl smiled. "The nearest city," she said. "Perhaps Mr. Carlsen will be able to explain more than I can. For the moment, I am sure he would wish me to emphasize that the main reason you are here is because we want to enjoy your company and your conversation."

"If Carlsen *were* here," Solo said grimly, "there's a couple of words—just two—which express completely my reactions to that remark!"

The girl laughed aloud. “It should be a stimulating evening,” she said, “for all three of us.”

“How do you fit in? Are you a stimulator, too?—or do you just look after the prisoners?”

“Something of each, perhaps,” Lala Eriksson said. “And in the latter role, I must warn you of one thing: you will find all manner of things about the house that could conceivably be used as weapons. Cutlery, golf clubs, tyre levers, billiard cues, wrenches, even African spears (though not firearms) in the gunroom. I need hardly add that they have been left freely about simply because Mr. Carlsen is absolutely certain—and I do mean certain—that there would be no point in anyone trying to use them. The guards are everywhere and they never miss.”

“I’m more interested in knowing where I am and why I’m here.”

Once again the girl smiled. “Dinner is at eight-thirty,” she said. “We usually take a cocktail at eight, in the library, and we should be happy if you would join us. You’ll find the door at the inner end of the hall, below the gallery. If there is anything you want before then, just ring.”

She raised the riding crop in a mock salute and left him.

Solo’s pockets had been completely emptied, but in the bathroom adjoining his own room he found toilet things laid out and a white silk shirt with a selection of ties on the bed. A dark suit that fitted him tolerably well was hanging in the closet. He shaved, showered and dressed. At ten past eights he went downstairs.

The library was immense: three walls of shelves filled with books from floor to ceiling, the fourth wall a network of carved panelling surrounding a recessed *cheminee* housing a log fire. The books looked as though they had all been read.

Lala was standing at a rosewood table beneath the central chandelier. Beside her, glass in hand, was a wide, bulky man who looked like Orson Welles on an off day. “Mr. Solo!” he exclaimed, moving forward with surprising grace. “One does so apologize for the—ah—unconventional form your invitation took. But it *is* nice to see you perpendicular at last.”

“Let us praise while we can the vertical man,” Solo quoted with a crooked smile, “so soon to become the horizontal out…”

“Ah, now—you mustn’t feel like that. One admits a certain—ah—theatricality about the means one employed to get you here, about the machinery of seeing that you stay. But then, that’s inseparable from having

guests who may wish to leave before one is oneself tired of their company, don't you feel?" The voice was firm and yet mellifluous, the perfect complement to the lithe way in which the big man moved.

"The only thing I feel, Mr…. Carlsen?… is curiosity," Solo replied. "Curiosity about the real reason for my presence here. Curiosity about the great pains taken to achieve this—er—visit. Forgive my ignorance and boorishness, but, again… *why?"*

"We wanted to talk to you, Mr. Solo. That's all. It really is."

The girl was standing beside them. She was wearing a cocktail dress in vivid crimson velvet. From overhead, the light sculptured the soft flesh of her shoulders and hollowed with shadow the slopes of her bosom. "What will you take, Mr, Solo?" she asked. "A dry Martini? Whisky? A vermouth?"

"I'll take a Campari and soda, if you have one," the agent said.

Lala moved across to the wall, dark stockings on her legs gleaming, and tugged at an old fashioned bell-pull. A moment later, a saturnine manservant appeared in the doorway. Behind him, Solo saw the shape of one of the gunmen in the shadows below the staircase.

"Campari and soda for Mr. Solo," the girl said. "And two more whisky sours for Mr. Carlsen and me."

While they waited for dinner, both Carlsen and the girl kept the conversation general. They talked about the New York theatre, about West Coast jazz, about European sports cars, about national rivalries in the Middle East. And as it suited the agent to play a waiting game and see what transpired, and neither of his "hosts" said anything in the slightest degree bearing upon the fact that he was a kidnapped prisoner, the talk remained on this rarefied if artificial level until the manservant reappeared to announce that dinner was served.

Both Carlsen and the girl were well-read and well informed, and such was the quality of their argument and their charm that Solo had constantly to keep reminding himself of his predicament. Even so, he found himself drawn willy-nilly into a spirited defense of the Stanislavsky school of acting and was despite himself enjoying an urbane attempt to demolish Carlsen's theory in favor of Brecht, when the girl took his arm and led the way to the dining room.

Feeling self-conscious and slightly ridiculous, like a man who finds himself on stage during the second act of a drawing-room comedy, Solo

moved with her.

The meal was excellent: avocado with a vinaigrette sauce, an exquisite *truite aux feuilles vertes* served with a delicate Tokay d'Alsace. Tournedos Rossini that melted in the mouth, and a Chambolle Musigny that turned out to be one of the noblest Burgundies that Solo had ever tasted.

He was poring over an unusually wide selection of cheeses offered on a board by the manservant when Carlsen said casually: "I suppose you find in your work, Mr. Solo, that more than half your assignments devolve upon thwarting some villainy or other perpetrated by this Thrush organization. Do you find this involutary—er—specialization makes you stale for any other work you do?"

The agent finished transferring a segment of Chalaronne to his plate on the double prongs of the cheese knife before he replied. Although the question had taken him completely by surprise, his hand neither faltered nor altered the speed of its movements. It was an awkward query, nevertheless; without knowing who or what his captor was, he was unwilling to give it a straight answer, yet he could hardly be so childish as to brush it off with a Secretary of State's "No comment". That would be to impute to himself an importance in the Command which he had no wish to claim… especially now!

In the event, he smiled, looked up at his host, and said mildly, "A trained officer of any kind of enforcement agency—whether it's police, army, intelligence or whatever—learns to regard every assignment as though it were his first. Each one is completely fresh. And I don't know where you get your figures from—but I could hardly confirm your fifty-percent-plus estimate, you know!"

Carlsen was smiling broadly. "Or deny?" he said mischievously.

Solo nodded. "Or deny," he agreed.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Solo! In my business," the other said—as an oil king might say to a movie tycoon—"in my business one is bound to run up against a lot of facts and figures concerning Thrush. Were it otherwise, it would be unnatural… like being in the motor racing game without having heard of Ferrari!"

"And just what is your business, Mr.—er—Carlsen?"

"We are both adults, Mr. Solo. I see no point in elaborate fencing. It bores and disgusts me. And in any case it is obvious that I operate on the

wrong side of the law. As to a precise description… what would you say, my dear?"

"I should say that you were in the transport business," Lala Eriksson replied.

Carlsen was delighted. "That's it! That's exactly it," he chuckled. "I am in the transport business… the transportation of items of value, shall we say, from one locality to another!"

"That could cover safe-breaking, bank robbery, kidnapping, espionage, smuggling, drugs or the white slave traffic," Solo said.

"So it could, Mr. Solo. So it could. Do you find that Thrush keep abreast of the remarkable advances in communications we see today? Would you say their telecommunications set-up, for instance, compares with yours, or with that of the United Nations or the MVD?"

The agent spread butter on a Bath Oliver biscuit. "A man of your intelligence can hardly expect a specific answer to that," he said.

Carlsen immediately channelled the subject deftly in another direction. "It's always a moot point, of course," he said, "whether the initial advantage the lawbreaker has… attacker's advantage of surprise… is balanced by the cohesion of the forces arrayed against him. Even if an evil organization like Thrush used satellite techniques for some really grand-scale project, I have a suspicion that the forces of law and order would close ranks so firmly as to make their own systems work better."

"Yes, but you talk of law and order and of evil," the girl interrupted, "as though they were finite qualities and not just subjective labels that people tie on as it suits them "

"I know what you're going to say, Lala," Carlsen in his turn cut in. "And it's perfectly true what Orwell said in that *Horizon* piece all those years ago Did you ever see it, Mr. Solo? It was called *Raffles and Miss Blandish* and Orwell pointed out that a thriller in which *all* the characters were evil was pointless: it lost its punch unless there were also good characters. To be used, you see, as a yardstick against which the bad were measured. Devil worshippers are religious men; they cannot be atheists—because to acknowledge the existence of the Devil automatically implies the existence of a God against whom he works "

And the question of Solo's metier was not raised again until the following day. They had coffee and brandy and talked about the harnessing of the tides for the provision of electricity. Then they went to bed and in the

morning Solo and the girl went twice around an 18-hole pitch-and-putt course laid out in the grounds. Carlsen did not appear until lunchtime, but they were never out of sight of one or more of the armed guards, Solo noticed.

During the meal—pesto followed by a chicken souffle—they talked of automation and the need to educate people to use the extra leisure it would bring. Carlsen had sent away the light Chianti with which they had washed down the pasta and its fragrant green sauce, and was busy opening a bottle of Corton Charlemagne. “Oddly enough,” he said with a sidelong glance at Solo, “that brings me back to Thrush. My agents tell me that they work from what they call the Ultimate Computer. Have you ever heard of that?”

“I have heard the phrase used,” Solo said guardedly. “Apparently it’s the computer to end all computers…. One hears that it directs every major operation they handle. They feed in all the relevant data, and the computer comes up with the required plan of action.”

“Really?”

“Right down to the smallest detail, they say—including the particular operatives to be briefed and the exact course of action each must follow!”

“In view of their record of successes over the past few years, one can only suggest that such a computer, if it existed, should be re-programmed,” Solo said drily.

Lala Eriksson laughed. “You can hardly expect a computer—even if it’s ultimate!—to take into account the vagaries of people like you!” she said.

And later, after Carlsen had excused himself on the plea that he had work to do in his study, and they were sitting on chintz-covered chairs over coffee in the drawing room, she came back to the subject. “Leaving aside the efficiency of the plans it makes,” she said, “don’t you think the use of a highly sophisticated computer like that would in fact *delay* an operation, once you had operatives in the field reporting in?”

“I don’t quite see why,” Solo said.

“Well, because any reasonable plan would have to be constantly amended—every report from the field would materially alter the overall situation, and would have to be taken into account before the next stage of the plan was evolved.”

“So?”

“So although a computer *decides* quickly, in a fraction of a second, I imagine the time taken to *prepare* it for that decision—making ready the

data cards, programming, feeding in, and so on—could easily negate the advantage given by its operating time. After all, top men can decide quickly, too. That's why they are top men. And all they have to deal with is a telephone call, or a written message, or something equally immediate."

"Possibly."

"In other words," the girl said, "I'm not at all sure that they wouldn't be better off using the old fashioned human-error methods—at least as far as the time element goes."

Solo decided to hold out a carrot. "You're leaving out the *quality* of the relative plans, the computer and the human," he said. "But in any case, we live in a technical age, don't forget. It's not always simply a case of an agent telephoning in, is it?"

She took him up on it immediately. "You mean the more sophisticated methods of communication—microdot pictures, codes, scrambled radio messages, holograms, unusual frequencies used on broadcasts to activate the keys of telex machines—all these would take just as much time as programming a computer?"

"Exactly."

"Yes… I suppose a big organization like these Thrush people would simply have to keep abreast of the latest developments to stay in business, wouldn't they?"

"Would they?"

"Of course they would! But *you* know—what *do* they use in the way of communication? Clandestine communication, I mean. What do you use, Mr. Solo?"

"I send my headquarters a postcard," Solo said.

Lala Eriksson laughed. "You probably do, at that!" she said. "Will you have another cup of coffee?"

And later in his own room, after they had walked around the flower gardens and he had pretended he had a headache as a means of gaining solitude, Solo went over the conversation—and the others they had had—very carefully in his own mind. It was puzzling enough to have been kidnapped between assignments and taken to some country retreat apparently far from New York; it was doubly surprising, after this coup, to find himself a very free prisoner being wined and dined and indulged in intellectual conversation. But the most astonishing thing of all was the reaction of his hosts at his response, or lack of it, to the occasional loaded

question they carefully introduced into all this good living! They had said they wanted to talk to him… that was all. And indeed this seemed up to a point to be true. And the subject, disguise it as they would, was obviously enough something to do with communications, either Thrush's or those of U.N.C.L.E. And yet each time Solo blocked or ignored the question—as he invariably did—they dropped the subject with perfect good humor and never returned to it! This seemed to him an odd reaction for people who had gone to such immense pains to abduct him….

In fact, so far as he could see, there was only one explanation which fitted all the disparate aspects of the case. And if he was right… then he was in big trouble! First, though, he would have to check; he would float out a decoy during dinner, and see if it was taken.

His opportunity came half way through the meal. *Faute de Grives, Quenelles de Brocket* and roast duck had all gone their splendid way, and Carlsen had adroitly—oh, very adroitly!—led the conversation from the population explosion, through the coming world food shortage and modern dietetics, to famine and natural catastrophe generally. And from there it was an easy step to measures designed to combat such things… and thus again to communications.

Solo smiled inwardly. "In such universal cases," he said, "I mean where there's no question of wrongdoing or people on the run, I see nothing wrong with the good old systems of telephone, cable or radio."

"Oh, but my dear fellow, just think!" Carlsen said. "What about an outbreak of bubonic plague, lethal fallout, the news that a country's water supply had become contaminated, anything that could cause panic? Surely news of such things must be transmitted in some form which hides its meaning from the casual eye? Otherwise a single unauthorized look could lead to riots!"

"As you were saying yesterday, there are codes, photographic—"

"No," Carlsen interrupted, "but suppose you had discovered that, for the sake of example, an unknown virus was threatening the year's rice crop in India, and that a neighboring country was going to exploit this. You'd want to give all the details to UNRWA or some other United Nations agency… you'd have to let them have all the data and decide for themselves if your theory was correct. And yet nobody must see your dispatches in case you were wrong—or in case it caused panic."

"Yes, well—the first thing to do would be—"

“You’d have to send graphs, tables, photographs of the affected plants, all sorts of things in addition to your written report. How would you do it?”

“I see what you mean,” Lala Eriksson said. “Pictures by radio or by wire can be intercepted; photographs, even microdot ones, can be developed; documents can be photostated. If there were other people equally interested in seeing your report—and you wished to prevent them—what would you do?” She looked at Solo.

“Yes,” Carlsen echoed. “What would you do, Mr. Solo? Use one of the satellites, make a hologram, scramble them with lasers? Do tell us.”

Solo decided to push out his decoy. “If there were other people after the information—who knew I had it—I’d be much more worried about them finding it out from *me* than from any messages I sent,” he said. “After all, the advances made in stupefiants, subliminal narcotics and so-called truth drugs have been considerable, even in the past five years “

Carlsen killed the subject stone dead. Interrupting Solo with a brusque apology, he summoned the manservant and kicked up a terrible fuss about a strawberry shortcake that was entirely blameless. And then, as soon as the man had removed it and gone to fetch something else, he plunged straight into an analysis of the servant problem before Solo could pick up the threads of his argument. But the agent didn’t mind: the *volte face* had told him exactly what he wanted to know. By inference at least, his own deductions were confirmed.

He knew, now, why he had been kidnapped between missions—and why his captors didn’t mind whether he answered their questions or not. For all U.N.C.L.E. agents are subliminally conditioned if they are on assignment to resist brainwashing and vouchsafe certain prepared replies under hypnosis, truth drugs or even torture. The treatment, which involves deep hypnosis itself and is still very secret, is given immediately after the operative has been briefed. Broadly speaking, it implants into the subconscious a succession of conditioned reflexes to any questions concerning the mission which are posed when the conscious mind is withdrawn. Like all good lies, it keeps as near to the truth as possible—for it can never be calculated how much a hostile questioner already knows, and if he finds the subject confirms facts already in his possession, he will be all the more ready to believe the fantasy that follows! And it provides a reason for all an agent’s actions that, despite the fact that it *fits* the facts, is very far from the true one! It is almost impossible adequately to pump an

operative who has been treated in this way; even if, in the extremities of torture, the man wishes to talk, the conditioning will impose upon him the false rather than the true line. Solo had good cause to underwrite the system from his own experience. For it had once* been the means of saving his life.

The only thing was… agents between missions were naturally enough not subjected to this treatment. And he was between missions.

Or, to put it another way, he was independently of his own wishes wide open to any system of drugs—whether secretly administered in the excellent food and drink or openly and forcibly—that his captors cared to use!

Now he realized why it didn't matter if he answered the questions or not; now he saw why Carlsen and the girl could be so casual about his replies: the repetitious queries about Thrush and U.N.C.L.E., the insistence on methods of communication, were simply to prepare the ground; to put these subjects in the forefront of his mind. The real questions would come later, when they had drugged him or hypnotized him at their leisure and his subconscious mind, unconditioned to resist, would be completely at their mercy…

Whoever they were—and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility, despite their apparent interest from the outside, that they themselves belonged to Thrush—Carlsen and Lala Eriksson badly wanted some of the mass of secret information that was locked in Solo's mind. And they could not afford to allow the subject of drugs to raise itself, in case it should tip the agent off.

Now that he *had* found out, he had to discover some way of foiling the guards, the electric fence and the dogs, so that he could escape before it was too late!

*See *The Diving Dames Affair*

CHAPTER FIVE
Exit By Moonlight!

So far as Napoleon Solo could see, the only possible time to try and escape from the house run by Carlsen and Lala Eriksson was at night. Certainly it was after dark that the guards would be at their most alert, but it was equally true that nighttime gave him the only opportunity to approach unseen the boundary of the property. And in any case, time was precious: he had already been allowed nearly forty-eight hours of good living in which to become “acclimatized”, softened up for the drug or hypnosis interrogation which must have been planned. Yet although his captors would freely accept this unproductive period in the interests of long-term success, their need for whatever information they wanted from him must be urgent. The organization of the kidnap showed that. So they would proceed to Stage Two at the earliest possible moment.

In addition to which, people of their sophistication would not make the mistake of underrating Solo’s intelligence. They would know quite well that his mind would be racing, racing all the time he was in captivity. He could only hope that they would assume he would want to stay as long as he could in order to find out as much as possible about them. But in any case their fear of what he might deduce would lend an added impetus to their desire to get on with their plan!

Which was why he decided to make his attempt as soon as he had realized what he was up against—the very same night. There were very few preparations he could make. What there were, he went over again and again in his mind before he acted. The exit from the house he had decided to make via the roof: the doors and windows were certain to be guarded by some kind of electronic burglar alarm which would sound whether the person crossing the threshold were coming or going. And he had already marked down a likely trapdoor at the head of the stairs. For a successful essay at crossing the electrified fence, he would need a length of rope, and this he hoped to find in the garages. And finally, to keep the dogs quiet, he was relying—extraordinary though this seemed!—upon his own teeth! There was a shell cap crowning one of his molars, and this could be unscrewed to reveal a tiny cavity in which Solo carried two minute pellets of a quick-acting knockout drug.

He had managed to convey two slices of duck and half a *quenelle* to his pocket during dinner. And, after he had returned to his room at eleven thirty, the first thing he did was to shake these from his handkerchief and treat them with the tablets.

He unscrewed the crown, shook out the miniature pills and, having ground them to a fine powder with the shaft of his razor, smeared the white dust liberally over the surface of the food. Then, dressing himself in the travel-creased clothes in which he had been kidnapped, he settled down to wait.

Carlsen and Lala Eriksson slept at opposite ends of the big landing. The manservant had a small suite of rooms off the kitchens. It was after twelve before the sounds of activity ceased from these three points, but Solo waited another full hour before he even got up off his bed.

At two-fifteen, water ran for half a minute or so somewhere downstairs. At two-fifty, one of the dogs in the grounds barked and then was silent. Solo eased open his door as three o'clock struck from the clock tower above the stables. When he heard the single note of the half hour, he began tiptoeing silently along the passage towards the landing.

It was a clear, moonlit night and the staircase and most of the space beyond it was barred with pale swathes of light falling in through the deep windows above the front door.

The trapdoor was clearly visible in the gloom. But first the agent had to make a trip downstairs. Placing his weight with infinite care on the extreme outside of the treads, he stole down to the hallway and trod softly through the drawing room and on into the gunroom. He had memorized the position of the furniture but the curtains were still drawn and the journey was difficult. Once he came within an inch of stumbling over a coffee table laden with cups and saucers that must have been moved after he had gone to bed. But at last he was standing in pitch darkness by the billiard table in the gunroom, listening to the silence. He removed the long-handled cue-rest, with its x-shaped brass end, from the rack and began the return journey.

He had just left the coffee-and-cigar-smelling closeness of the drawing room when he froze back into the shadows beneath the stairs. Through the French windows leading to the terrace, he saw the shadow of a man fall across the flagstones as one of the guards crossed the corner of the moonlit

lawn. In a way it was nice to have his suspicions confirmed—but it gave him quite a shock and made him realize afresh the difficulty of his task.

Upstairs again he picked up his shoes from the landing and slung them around his neck by the laces. Outside Carlsen's door he could hear a steady and even snoring. The girl's was ajar, and it was more than ten minutes before he was satisfied that the faint sounds of breathing were deep and regular enough to mean that she slept. But at last he was ready. It was time to act. Climbing on to the newel post at the head of the stairs, he supported himself against the wall with one hand and pushed at the trapdoor with the brass head of the cue-rest.

He had seen that the door was of the counterbalanced kind that would stay open as soon as it had been pushed past the vertical instead of falling over with a slam on to the floor of the loft. But it remained to be seen in practice whether the mechanism was working properly! He pushed a little harder. With the tiniest of creaks, the trapdoor freed itself from its frame and swung upwards into darkness.

Straining, Solo fed up the long wooden handle of the cue-rest. The opening yawned wider and wider still; the door rose higher and higher. When it was almost vertical, presenting the minimum face to his thrust, the metal "x" of the rest slipped on the painted wood with a slight scraping sound. Solo froze; Carlsen gave an extra loud snore and turned over in his sleep; and a moment later the door fell away from the cue-rest and homed in the open position against the pressure of its spring-loading.

The agent realized that he had been holding his breath, and released a lungful of air in a long sigh. He lowered the cue-rest carefully to the floor and leaned it against the wall. And then he prepared to jump….

Balanced awkwardly on the newel post with one stockinged foot on either side of the wooden ball decorating it, he was in a poor position for a spring. But it had to be done. The trapdoor was about two feet above the tips of his fingers as he stood there with outstretched arms. Tensing the muscles of his toes, he flexed his knees, drew a deep breath… and leaped upwards!

The sole of one foot slipped slightly on the polished wood as he took off, so that it was the fingers of his left hand only which hit the frame of the trapdoor, clenched, and frenziedly hung on.

For a timeless moment, he swung over the stairwell, his whole weight on the fingers of his left hand. If the shrieking muscles and sinews and

bones of his five fingers couldn’t hold him, he would drop to the hall below, and such a fall—even if it didn’t break his back—would bring the household around him before he could drag enough breath into his lungs to cry out!

With the sweat pouring down his temples into his eyes, he scrabbled for a hold with his right hand, found it, and then began the nerve-wracking task of hauling his body up on to a level with his hands.

By the time he had managed to drag himself up out of the moonlit dusk of the landing and flop down in the musty darkness of the loft, the muscles of his forearms and biceps were trembling uncontrollably. For two minutes he lay there panting. Then he rose cautiously to his knees and lowered the trapdoor into place again.

Twenty minutes later, after what had seemed an eternity of groping and fumbling in the dark, always fearing that he would step on a joist that creaked or put a foot through the plaster of a ceiling, he was letting himself out on to a slope of tiled roof through a tiny attic dormer.

The moon, riding high in a gap between banks of cloud, was two or three days past the full, its milky light streaming down to throw stables and wall and garage and trees into sharp relief, like the cardboard cutouts of a toy farm. Between them, the ground was dense with shadow.

And somewhere in that shadow, probably, at least one of the torpedoes patrolled with his machine pistol….

Up on his roof, Napoleon Solo shrugged. Guards or no guards, he had to move fast. If they had been going to drug him, whatever it was might have been in the dinner he had eaten some hours ago. What was more likely—if in fact his guess that tonight was the night was correct—was that they would surprise him while he was asleep… at the traditional hour when resistance was at its lowest ebb. Which could mean any-time after the next half hour. Carlsen could have an alarm set to waken him at four. He could be awake already. And in either case Solo had to get clear before he was found missing—just in case!

Edging his way to the shadowed side of the roof, he found a stackpipe, tested it, and lowered himself silently over the guttering.

The descent was surprisingly easy. The pipe was of some rough composition, quite thick, and firmly anchored to the wall. Taking advantage of the excellent grip it offered. Solo swarmed down and rounded the corner of the terrace on stockinged feet. Beyond a shallow flight of steps bordered

by classical urns, a stretch of moonlit lawn separated him from the shadowed side of the garage.

He had no time to reconnoiter. The shadow he had seen from the hallway had been moving in the same direction as himself. He must just hope that the man's tour of duty was hourly or half-hourly, in which case he would still have a couple of minutes before the guard was due again. He would have to risk it.

Taking a deep breath, he sprang down the steps and padded across the lawn. The brightness of the moonlight was like a blow in the face. He felt as spotlit and as vulnerable as a high-wire walker until he had gained the comparative safety of the trough of shadow which lay along the side of the old brick building. But none of the blank windows of the house was raised in protest; no call to halt split the silence; no flame from a revolver seared the dark. Releasing his breath in a long sigh, Solo slid around the corner and tried the garage doors.

As he had hoped, they were not locked. Let into the big outer doors was a small inner one that swung noiselessly open as he turned the handle. He slipped through and pulled it close after him.

He could make out the dim shapes of four cars in the reflected light filtering through the windows—a station wagon, a Cadillac, and two small foreign vehicles, one a sedan and the other a convertible. Although the Caddy's vast trunk yawned obediently open as soon as he touched the button, he drew blank when he rummaged around in its interior. It was completely empty. With the station wagon, however, he had more luck. Lifting the wide back door, he found in the space behind the third row of seats exactly what he was looking for; a coil of towing rope, about twelve feet long, with a small iron grappling hook spliced into one end.

With an exclamation of satisfaction, Solo eased the rope out from underneath a heavy tower jack and a roll of tools, and coiled it around his own waist beneath his jacket. Then, having untied the shoes from their position round his neck and slipped them on, he was ready to go.

For a moment he toyed with the idea of trying to find out what State he was in from the license plates of the cars. But it wasn't light enough to read them and he was by no means sure he could decipher them adequately by touch. Besides which, it was late… the stable clock had chimed four times several minutes ago.

Tiptoeing back to the garage door, he pried it open. And froze.

A man was standing four yards away, his back to the garage, staring up at the roof of the house. Holding his breath, Solo followed his gaze. All along the mellow facade, dark windows shinily reflected the light of the moon. All except one.

Of the four attic dormers piercing the tiled roof, one—the left-hand one—gaped open upon a black interior. In the silver light which poured down from the sky and etched in sharp relief every imperfection in the bricks, the window which Solo in his haste had left open stood wide to the night.

For a moment longer, the guard stood there. And then, dropping his machine pistol to the full extent of his arm, he turned slowly around to scrutinize the moonlit garden.

Luckily for Solo, the moon had shifted enough since he had entered the garage for the shadow of the gable to fall across the partly opened door. He would have to trust to the contrast between light and shade to hide this fact, for he dare not try to close it now.

The guard's eyes swept past the garage and on towards the corner of the house. And then, apparently making up his mind, the man strode off towards the front of the house.

As soon as he was out of sight, Solo was through the door and away in the opposite direction as hard as he could go. Treading silently on rubber soles, he flitted past the stables and skirted the wall enclosing the kitchen garden. A sweep of gravel drive separated him from the lawns. Pausing impatiently until the moon had sailed behind one of the banks of cloud that had been spreading across the sky from the east, he sped over it.

Twice, the fine stones crunched loudly under his feet; but he was past caring now whether people heard him. Cursing the carelessness which had led him to leave the dormer window open, he reached the grass… and began running like the wind towards the boundary of the estate.

He had decided to make his attempt at the spot where the electrified wire came nearest to the house, reasoning that most of the guards would probably be on the far side, where it was farthest away.

Once, on his way, he had to drop to the ground when he saw a guard crossing an open patch on the far side of a shrubbery. Otherwise he encountered nobody, and soon he was standing, a little out of breath, under a tall cedar tree just inside the wire fence. He withdrew the pieces of doctored food from inside his pocket.

Behind him, across a dark reach of lawn, lights had come on behind the front door of the house.

Solo uncoiled the rope from around his waist. Freeing about six feet of the end with the hook on it, he looped the rest over his left wrist and began to whirl the hook around his head. He was staring up at the tree as he tried to choose a suitable branch at which to aim, when a slight noise to his left drew his attention.

One of the guards was standing among the bushes with his FN raised to fire.

The agent acted almost by reflex. Like lightning, he fed more rope to his right hand, increased the thrust of his arm, and dropped his wrist a shade. The heavy iron hook altered its trajectory, whistling through the air in a flat arc, to thud wickedly into the side of the gunman's head. The man stiffened, dropped his weapon, and then crashed backwards among the branches, pole-axed.

Solo stole a glance over his shoulder. Windows blazed with light all along the upper floor of the house. At any moment, they would discover that his room was empty.

He whirled the rope again and cast upwards for a tangle of boughs about sixteen feet from the ground. At the third try, the hook caught firmly enough for the rope to take his weight. Then he turned to the fence and lobbed the pieces of drugged food over into the space between the wire and the outer wall.

He didn't see the dogs come, neither had he seen or heard them before —but they were on the stuff in an instant, a blur of heavy bodies snarling and snuffing in the dark as they wrestled for the tasty morsels.

Solo was half way up the rope, swinging like a pendulum, before the great beasts had swallowed the food. As they staggered and sank to the ground, he rocked the rope, Tarzan-like, to its zenith and released his grasp as he rose towards the electrified fence.

There was a rush of air against his face, a confused impression of lights, and a jarring impact that shook every bone in his body.

But he was over! He had fallen half way across the bare strip which lay between the wall and the fence, not far from the supine bodies of the drugged hounds. As he rose groggily to his feet, the moon swam out from behind the cloudbank, flooding the area with light.

Into the high, thin, singing silence, a clamor of voices burst distantly from the house. They must have discovered that he was missing….

He glanced desperately around. An alarm bell was ringing in the gatehouse fifty yards to his left, where the wire fence crossed the main drive by means of a steel grid gate. The outer gates themselves were housed in an arch piercing the building. So there would be no hope of escape that way.

He turned to his right just as a low and menacing growl throbbed into the air. A third Doberman was regarding him balefully from above the fallen bodies of its mates.

Solo took one look at the murderous blaze of its eyes and whirled into action.

Tearing off his jacket he advanced towards the dog with a suppressed snarl of rage. For an instant the beast, taken by surprise, backed away, its hackles raised. And in that moment the agent swerved aside and hared for the wall.

Pelting up, he swung the jacket round his head and dashed it at the top of the brickwork, where a flinty sierra of broken glass glittered in the moonlight.

By a miracle, the cloth caught and held. Gasping, Solo swung his feet forward and up as the killer dog bounded in, snapping at his heels. Seconds later, he had hauled himself up and dropped soundlessly to the grass verge on the far side.

Silently, he ran off down a white ribbon of road traversing a dream landscape under the moon.

Behind the demesne wall, floodlights were glaring on all over the grounds; voices shouted, dogs bayed and a car engine roared into action. He must get out of sight, and quickly! And since the only advantage he had was that Carlsen and his men would not yet know that he had only just escaped and might think he had got away hours ago, he might as well go to ground as near the house as possible, leaving them to search the roads for miles around….

He was now passing a gate which led into a large field. A little way down the road, the long, low outbuildings of a farm bulked against the night sky. And here, between the roadway and the gate, was a cattle grid, one of those iron grilles placed over a depression in the ground to deter livestock from straying off their owners’ property.

Without pausing to think. Solo pried up the heavy grid, dropped into the space below it, and lowered it cautiously down over him.

For what seemed like many hours, he lay there with his face pressed to the cold, musty moisture of the earth. Cars, several of them it seemed, swept past two or three times. Once a spotlight moved slowly along the verge as some vehicle ground past in low gear. Bars of light fingered the dark in Solo's self-chosen prison, fanning out over the mud revealing a tuft of blanched leaves, a spider scurrying, the gluey end of a worm. Later the footsteps of several people clattered by. And finally it was quiet.

Groaning with cramp. Solo got his shoulders to the grille and levered it up. To his astonishment, he saw that he had been lying in the shallow trench for a little less than seventy minutes. He stood upright and surveyed the terrain. The moon had sunk below the horizon and the meadows lay spread out beneath the dark sky as far as he could see. However far the motorized hue and cry had ranged, though, he was sure that Carlsen would have left several sentries in the immediate neighborhood of the house. To take to the road would be suicidal; he would do better to strike across the fields until he came across another, and then walk until he could get a lift to the nearest township from an early driver.

Swiftly he clambered over the gate and hurried along the boundary of the field in the shelter of a tall hedge.

A half mile further on, he reached a line of trees stretching away diagonally towards the east, where a faint lightening of the sky confirmed the crowing of a nearby cock. Ten minutes later, he was standing on top of a bank bordering a narrow country lane.

Solo glanced up and down the ghostly white ribbon of the road. There was nothing to be seen—no light, no headlamp, no guards.

He plunged down the bank and set off at a jogtrot in the direction which seemed to lie farthest from Carlsen's house. Judging from the sky, it would be roughly south.

Presently he saw lights come on in a cottage on the far side of a field. The cock crowed again and a distant dog barked. Far away across the dark countryside a long, low structure was silhouetted against the sky. It looked like a flyover carrying a State Highway above the flat land; and indeed when he stopped he could hear the hum of traffic and make out the moving blurs of far-off trucks and cars above the concrete balustrade.

A little later, the road curved around a small wood and he came to a T-junction. It was quite light now. And against the far hedgerow—at last—there was a signpost.

Solo stopped. He was panting a little and he was very thirsty. For a moment he stared at the two fingerboards of the sign.

The directions were in an unfamiliar white lettering on an enamelled blue ground. And then he fell back a pace and his mouth dropped open in total astonishment….

The right-hand board said *Buronzo 6.* That on the left announced *Novara 27.* And below it was a separate sign, a green one, on which white characters spelled out the legend *Autostrada Milano-Torino 3.*

No wonder there had been “foreign” cars in the garage!

No wonder the license plates had been unfamiliar! No wonder he couldn’t place the landscape!

His kidnappers, far from spiriting him to an adjoining State, had flown him clean across the Atlantic and he was now in Italy.

CHAPTER SIX

Solo Steals A Ride

It was two minutes short of ten o'clock, and the sun was high in the cloudless sky, before conditions in the layby were right for Napoleon Solo to act.

He had walked for several kilometers along the foot of the embankment which carried the motor road before he caught sight of the white "P" on a blue square which denoted a parking area above him. Then, after he had scrambled up and concealed himself in a clump of bushes to one side of the neat macadam lot, events had seemed to conspire to thwart his intentions.

For more than two hours, nobody pulled into the layby at all. The early drivers were all long-distance commuters with no time to spare, while the truck-drivers had too recently stopped for coffee, or were too eager to reach the city before the morning rush-hour fouled up the streets, to need a rest just here. After that, a steady procession of cars, long-distance lorries and trailers drew up, waited, and pulled away again. But either more than one stopped at a time, or the cars carried several people, or they were not powerful enough, or the driver didn't get out. There was always something wrong!

Solo lay sweating in the long grass and cursed them all. His jacket had been left transfixed on the wall of Carlson's house and at first, in the chill air of dawn, he had missed it. Now, however, the heat from the mid-morning sun was beating down upon his back and he wished he had left the shirt as well.

Almost mesmerized by the continuous roar of traffic, he squinted his eyes against the glare and gazed over the twin ribbons of the autostrada at the lush silver-grey meadows of the Lombardy plain beyond.

Alone in a foreign country with no papers, no money, no weapons, no clothes except those he was wearing, Solo needed to get in touch with Waverly fast! And the only way he could do that was by radio… and to

reach a radio he must get to a city. Which in turn meant that he would have to steal a car.

It was not all that easy to do, though. To begin with, he had no possessions at all: there was not one single item in the pockets of his suit. Secondly, this meant in practice that he had to choose a vehicle with a driver but no passenger, and one whose driver actually vacated the car when it stopped. And thirdly, he had to wait until such a car drew up when the layby was empty. In addition, the car itself must be powerful enough to cover the 45-odd kilometers to the end of the autostrada before its driver could telephone through and give the alarm—yet there were emergency phones every kilometer. Once, Solo thought his luck was in when a Mercedes 230SL carrying only the driver pulled in just after a whole string of trucks had left. But the young man at the wheel never left the car. He smoked a cigarette without moving from the driving seat and then moved off.

Another time, a middle-aged woman left a Fiat 2300 with its engine running while she poked about in a copse on the far side of the layby picking wild flowers. The agent had actually been on his feet when two Dutch oil tankers with trailers lumbered up and parked just beyond the car.

But at last it happened. The layby was empty. A Lancia Flaminia hurtled into the lot and pulled up with a squeal of brakes. The driver got out, looked around him, and then plunged into the bushes about fifty yards away from Solo. And Solo himself, rising like a phoenix from his grassy bed, sprinted across the macadam, jerked open the door and slid into the driving seat. An instant later he had twisted the starter key, slammed the big car into first, and swung the wheel hard over to steer back towards the road.

He had a momentary impression in the rear-view mirror, of a shouting figure waving its arms, and then he was away, treading the accelerator flat against the boards as the Lancia howled down the concrete strip towards Turin.

If the enraged owner relied on the phone, he would probably be all right, Solo thought. But if the law happened to pass the layby before he got through, things might get a little difficult! As he flashed past the mid-moming traffic on the heat-shimmered roadway, he kept one eye warily on the mirror, on the lookout for a black-and-white patrol car, the sound of a siren, the sight of a pair of dark-uniformed *polizia stradale* on Gilera motorcycles.

It was nevertheless through the windscreen that he received a shock. Slantwise across the hard shoulder, he read the huge notice; *Pedaggio 5000m.* Of course… there was a toll at the end of the road and he hadn't a penny on him!

He glanced at the speedometer. The Lancia was hitting 185 kph. He had rather less than two minutes to think of a way out….

Desperately, he searched through the glove compartment. He found spare headlamp bulbs, a sparking plug, a dirty handkerchief, a pile of crumpled sweet papers—but not the handful of forgotten coins he had hoped for.

Another sign loomed up, whistled past, and sank from sight behind. *Pedaggio 3000m.*

Solo darted a glance over his shoulder at the back seat. No briefcase; no wallet; no holdall. He felt in the deep pocket at the side of his door. Nothing. In the pocket on the passenger side… Nothing but maps.

Pedaggio 1000m.… and just down the road he could see the modernistic flat roofs, the stalks of electric standards, the colored traffic lights of the pay station. On an impulse, he lifted the leather holder for the car's parking disc from the padded shelf above the dashboard. It was stamped in gold with the number of a Milan garage.

And under it was a pink card half full of punched holes that looked as though it might be some kind of season ticket for the autostrada

Braking, Solo heaved a deep sigh of relief. He had noticed that the Lancia was registered in Milan. Obviously the owner was a regular traveller between the two cities. And thank goodness for that! He changed down to third, to second, and rolled down his window to hold out the card as the Flaminia slid to a halt opposite the uniformed attendant.

The man took the card, swung round into his glassed-in booth, struck a punch with the flat of his hand, and handed the card back to Solo all in a single motion. He gestured the car on and pressed a switch to change the light in front of it to green.

Solo was through. But he hadn't a moment to waste… one of the men at the pay station had been gesticulating at a telephone. They could be after him at any time.

The drowsing fields tufted with poplars, the long lines of farm buildings in mellow brick, had given way to the graceless clutter which despoils the outskirts of so many modern cities. As the Lancia was sucked into the

vortex of traffic swirling towards the centre. Solo saw thin chimneys belching flame at the sky, vacant lots pockmarked with shanties of corrugated iron, scrap yards high with wrecked and rusty cars, and everywhere behind hoardings was the stuttering of excavators and bulldozers. Across the flat horizon, the city was battlemented with the great slabs of modern apartment blocks.

The traffic stream was moving too fast—and the road system was too complicated—for him to choose a special route. For a while, he stuck with the main flow, following the small signs pointing either to *Centra* or to *Francia.*

But then he found himself in the wrong lane at a big police-controlled junction. And while the great bulk of the traffic swung away unexpectedly to the left, he was forced to go straight ahead into a maze of narrow streets leading uphill towards the old town. To have attempted to cut across the line would have invited attention from the men on point duty, which was the last thing he wanted. Mentally, Solo shrugged and pressed on.

As he drove, he looked constantly for some sign that would bring him back to a through route. But all the likely streets seemed to be one-way… the wrong way! Willy-nilly, he was boring deeper and deeper into the warren of thoroughfares surrounding the cathedral.

He threaded the Lancia past a street market bright with fruit and vegetables, inadvertently drove through a procession of small boys in white surplices, and eventually found himself in a street so full of pedestrians that he had to stop. There were no sidewalks. Square, smooth setts of granite joined one tall, grey, shuttered row of houses to the other.

And outside every door big-bosomed women in black sat chattering to their neighbors while children gambolled from one side of the roadway to the other. In ten minutes, he had made no more than thirty yards through the throng.

He began to worry. The car was attracting attention. And yet he could scarcely leave it in the middle of the street. With no curbs, there was no logical place to park; and the few side-streets he passed were choked with vehicles blocking every single space.

At last in desperation he edged the Lancia towards an entry and turned into a courtyard at the far end of which was a *palazzo* in crumbling yellow stucco. He braked it to a stop beside a colonnade of Roman arches

supported on slender pillars and got out. From the far side of the court a voice called out: “Hey! You! What do you think you’re doing … ?”

Solo turned round. A policeman in a flat cap with a white cover was striding towards him, scowling. The agent whirled around and fled.

He ran back into the street with no sidewalks, darted across, and sped down a long cloister piercing a huge stone building on a corner. Behind him, footsteps clattered on the smooth-worn stones, voices were raised in protest, in interrogation, in laughter. A whistle shrilled over the babble of the crowd.

At the far end of the cloister, he found himself in a kind of paved foyer full of quiet elderly men in flowing black gowns. On the far side, glass doors led to a flight of steps above a street bright with sunlight.

Solo dashed past the academics, burst out of the doors and scrambled down the steps. A moment later, he was dodging through a press of students thronging a pavement cafe. Two more turns brought him to a wide main street just as the last of a long convoy of army trucks rumbled past the intersection. Without a second thought, he stepped into the roadway, swung himself up over the tailboard, and dropped into the dark space under the canvas canopy.

He could have gone to the American consul in Turin. But, even if his story had been believed, he was unwilling to involve his country in a personal dilemma which revolved entirely around his employment by a supra-national agency. And in any case, the convoy had given him an idea. It was a long shot, but if it came off it might mean a short-cut to Waverly in New York!

Forty minutes after he had swung aboard, he peered out of the back of the truck. The convoy had stopped in a compound to one side of a military encampment. And, judging from the conversation he had heard, the crews had marched off to the canteen for lunch.

Solo hitched the camouflaged overalls he had found among the stores in the truck higher on his shoulders and dropped to the ground.

From what he had been able to see as they lurched out of the city, the convoy had stopped about 35 kilometers north of Turin, somewhere between Cuorgne and Ivrea. And it looked very much as though it was part of a supply train for the big NATO exercise that Solo knew was taking place that week south of the Val d’Aosta. If he was right, his problems might be at an end….

Plucking a steel helmet covered in netting from the cab of the truck and putting it on his head, he walked nonchalantly along the back of the convoy, studying the vehicles comprising it.

There were twenty two covered three-tonners similar to the one in which he had travelled; a dozen half-tracks; two high, square ambulances with huge red crosses painted on their steel sides. And a command truck.

This was outwardly like the ambulances. But there was a complex of antennae on top of its squat roof. And in the boxlike tonneau, Solo knew, there would be a highly sophisticated and extremely powerful short-wave radio installation. Pretending to an air of casualness that he was far from feeling, he climbed up into the cab. Behind him, the sliding door blanking off the mass of switches and tuners and transistors and rheostats of the installation was half open. He stared out through the windscreen. There were soldiers busy about a khaki marquee tent about a hundred yards away, but nobody was looking in his direction.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed the starter button and, for the second time that day, steered a stolen vehicle out of a parking space towards the road….

CHAPTER SEVEN

Waverly Reasons Why !

The head of U.N.C.L.E.‘s Policy and Operations Department, Section One, laughed aloud. It was not a noise customarily heard in the Command’s headquarters and Illya Kuryakin treated it with respect. He waited. He listened. And by and by it was repeated. Waverly laughed again.

“Spectacular!” he barked. “And efficacious, I suppose, since it did get him in touch with me! But Heaven knows what I’m going to say to the Pentagon. Ha!”

The Russian frowned in puzzlement. “I’m sorry, Mr. Waverly… I’m afraid I do not quite…”

“Solo, Mr. Kuryakin! You knew he’d been taken to Italy by his captors and that he had escaped and contacted me. But you are probably ignorant of the precise methods he used to effect this.”

“Er… yes.”

“He climbed down a drainpipe, floored a gunman, leaped an electrified fence, drugged two killer dogs and escaped a third, before scaling a wall and stealing a car. Then he found himself in Turin and stowed away aboard a convoy of army lorries bound for maneuvers in the Val d’Aosta.”

The Russian smiled affectionately. “That sounds like Napoleon!”

“Yes, but the serious thing is that he made off with a command post truck and used it to communicate with me on the radio.”

“Surely, in the circumstances…”

“And as a uniform he happened to have found and put on was a spare one intended for the Umpires in the exercise, he got away with it!”

“Even so,” Kuryakin began, “I still do not see how you—”

“The annoying thing, though,” Waverly said, not looking in the least annoyed, “was that through a misinterpretation of something Solo said while he was dressed as an Umpire, the Italian army thought they had lost an entire armored division in a surprise attack! And by the time the mistake was discovered, it was too late… “

“And that has upset the course of the—er—exercise?”

Waverly nodded. “That’s the understatement of the year! But never mind. Here’s the transcript of Solo’s radio conversation with me. Read it, please, and then we can talk.” He handed Kuryakin a sheaf of typescript, settled back in his chair, and pulled a cherrywood and a tobacco jar towards him across the huge desk.

By the time Illya had finished reading, he was actually smoking, puffing out dense clouds of smoke with what appeared to be genuine enjoyment. “Well?” he asked, “Does anything strike you?”

“Yes, of course. Turin.”

Waverly nodded again. “Exactly. Turin. And Leonardo…”

The Russian’s face was suddenly grave. “Poor Leonardo!”

“Your man in Turin. Leonardo was shot down yesterday in the street just outside a branch post office on the outskirts of Turin. Two days previously we receive here a mysterious photographic plate, apparently meaningless, in a package bearing a Turin postmark. And now there is Solo.”

“Who is kidnapped in New York and flown secretly to a country house near… Turin.”

“And what does that imply to you, Mr. Kuryakin?”

“Well, obviously, that the assignment on which Leonardo is… was… working, and the kidnapping of Napoleon, are connected.”

“Just so. And if we bear in mind that Leonardo had obtained a priceless list of intended Thrush agents in Europe from the headquarters of their Supreme Council Member for the South… ?”

“It suggests that the house where Solo was imprisoned, the man called Carlsen… “

“Is either that Supreme Council Member himself, and the house is where Leonardo found the list, or else he is the head of a rival organisation who wants the list as badly as we do. And in either case, Solo was kidnapped because they wanted to pick his brains about communications. They chose him rather than anyone else simply because he was between assignments and was therefore, being unconditioned, an easier subject for interrogation.”

“It certainly seems from what Solo reports,” Kuryakin said, picking up the typescript again, “as though they were heading that way in the odd questions he was asked while he was there, doesn’t it?”

“It does. The questions could have been directed, very cleverly, at finding out how our agents reported, what systems they used, and in particular had we received any special ones from Turin recently. The similar enquiries about Thrush could have been a blind… or, if they are not Thrush, they may not have known whether Leonardo was working for us or for Thrush.”

“You are thinking of the photographic plate which arrived…?”

“Presumably from Leonardo, yes. And presumably containing in some concealed form the famous list. As Leonardo was murdered outside a post office, it seems reasonable to assume that he was about to send us the key to our mysterious photo.”

“Or had just sent it?”

“That too, is possible. An ordinary airmail letter wouldn’t have got here until today, anyway. But I suspect he was killed *before* he could let us know. In either case, it would be absolutely vital—either to Thrush or to a possible rival—to know whether *we* knew the contents of the list or not.”

“What do the lab boys say about the photographic plate?”

Waverly looked at his watch. “I’m expecting their report at any minute. In the meantime, we can plan on general lines. Since it was your case, I want you to go to Turin tonight and start backtracking on Leonardo right away. Mr. Solo can help. And between you, I hope you will turn up something, some clue—”

He broke off as one of the telephones on his desk burred discreetly. He lifted the receiver to his ear. “Waverly,” he said crisply.

He listened for a moment and then said: “I see. It’s as I thought then? And there’s no means of reading it, of deciphering it at all, unless we know what medium it was shot through?—actual piece, at the same angle?… I see. Thank you.”

For a moment more, he listened, and then he added: “We shall do what we can. Mr. Solo is there now. I am arranging with the Italian S.I.D. to supply him with papers, money, and so on. And Mr. Kuryakin will fly out to join him there tonight. Until they report, we shall just have to backpedal, then…. All right, George. Thank you very much.”

He lowered the receiver to its cradle, knocked out the cherrywood into a green glass ashtray, and turned to the Russian. “Do you know, Mr. Kuryakin,” he asked, “what a Hologram is?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

How To Read A Hologram

"A hologram," Colonel Rinaldi said to Napoleon Solo, "is in effect a photograph in three dimensions obtained without the use of lenses. Its advantage—or disadvantage in your case—is that the finished plate is useless without the original means of producing it."

Solo cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more specific, Colonel," he said. "I'm the one they send out when the assignment calls for action!"

Rinaldi laughed. "Very well. I shall start at the commencement," he said.

The two men were sitting on high stools at the side of an optical bench in a top secret laboratory hidden in an old hill fort on the high ground between Oulx and Sestriere. Solo, outfitted, gunned, supplied with papers, money and a magnificent meal by a dapper little man in the S.I.D., had driven out to see Rinaldi on the following morning. The laboratory, perched on a rocky spur near the famous winter sports resort, was one of the most closely guarded of all NATO research centers. And Rinaldi himself had been a Professor of Optics at Verona before he was made its Director-General. He was a short man, and compactly built, with immaculately waved hair and a face as brown and seamed and wrinkled as a walnut. He looked—Solo thought, trying hard to concentrate—so much like a character actor playing an Italian *direttore* that it was difficult to take him seriously.

"For holography," Rinaldi was saying now, "you have to have the laser. You are perhaps familiar with the laser, Signor Solo?"

The agent nodded. "You could almost say intimate," he said. "I was once almost melted by a laser*, less than two hundred kilometers from here!"

"Ecco! Then you will know that the laser is an exceptionally brilliant source of light, produced by the stimulation either of gases or of crystals, in

which all the waves are, so to speak, ‘in step’—what we call ‘coherent light’.”

“I’ll have to make the best of this,” Solo said. “But I do know that.”

“So. Holography is a method of photography employing this light—only instead of using a lens to record a focused image on the sensitized plate, we record simply *a pattern of interference* between two beams of coherent light… as one might record the pattern produced when one dropped two stones into a pool and the widening circles of ripples mingled.”

“Great! But I’m afraid that I can’t quite see.”

“Patience, Signor Solo! Patience! To make this hologram, we set up the object to be photographed and shine our laser beam at it… but not directly! We shine it through some semi-translucent medium that both reflects and refracts… a piece of mirror that is only half silvered, for example; a fragment of frosted glass; even a sheet of plastic.”

“Plastic!”

“Just so.” Rinaldi was well into his stride now; Solo reckoned he was getting free half the third year optics course from Verona. “Now what happens? Half of the light penetrates the medium and goes on to illuminate the object. And the rest is reflected back towards the light source, where we allow it to fall on the photographic plate. Now the light beam which goes on through to illuminate the object also makes its way back eventually to the photographic plate. *And it is the recording of the interference between these two halves of the original beam that makes the Hologram.”*

“What’s the effect, then? On the photographic plate, I mean.”

“When it is developed it makes what seems to be a meaningless blur. But wait!” Rinaldi raised a cautionary finger. “We shine the original laser beam at this blur… and, presto! we see the original object in three dimensions again!”

“I think I should understand more easily if I could see—”

“I show you! I show you!” The Colonel bounded over to his desk and opened a wide, shallow drawer. He took out what looked like an ordinary photographic plate measuring around six inches by four inches and handed it to the agent. Solo glanced at it. The ground-glass surface looked like a close-up of a piece of granite or a pattern formed by a non-regular kaleidoscope: a completely random assembly of differently colored flecks.

“That is the hologram,” Rinaldi said, bustling about between the bench and a series of work tables ranged along one wall. “Now we bring it back to life for you!”

He dragged over a heavy, boxlike structure bearing two dials and a row of switches, plugged a coaxial cable into the mains supply, and then attached a lead which projected from between the ventilation louvres on the steel side of the box to a complicated framework screwed to the bench. In the framework he fixed a hooded metal cylinder about twenty inches long and five inches in diameter, from one end of which projected what looked like a camera lens. “This is a ruby laser,” he explained. “Only a small one—thirty joules—since it is for demonstration. But you can see what it will do…”

He arranged a somewhat shabby-looking mirror three feet away from the output aperture of the laser, took back the hologram and slotted it into a groove prepared in the bench, and walked across to draw black curtains over the opaque, reeded glass of the windows. Then he handed Solo a pair of dark glasses, flicked over a master switch beside the laser, and turned out the lights.

After a moment there was a brilliant blue-green flash from the bench followed by a deep, low humming noise. Almost at once Solo discerned a curious rose-colored fluorescence surrounding the laser cylinder; and then a painfully intense pencil of vivid crimson light pulsed from the aperture and lanced down the length of the bench. He looked further down the polished surface and gasped.

Where there had been an empty space of wood, there was now a silver tray of coffee and liqueurs laid out. Solo could see the shine on the bone china, the dark luster of coffee, the jewelled highlight lurking in the drink. He reached out his hand … and touched nothing.

Behind him in the dark, Rinaldi chuckled. “That is what you see in our meaningless blur when the right kind of light illuminates it!” he said.

“But that’s uncanny! exclaimed.

“It is impressive, no? But wait… I show you more…”

Rinaldi switched on the lights, fetched a large gilded picture frame from a corner and suspended it from the ceiling hook a few feet in front of Solo. The area circumscribed by the frame resembled the smaller hologram the agent had examined before: a wilderness of colored fragments. But as soon as the Italian reset some switches and altered the angle of the laser, the gilt

framed a perfect three-dimensional color photo—a street scene in a small town, with gaily striped awnings over market stalls and a couple of cars parked by the entry to a side road.

"Remarkable! The 3-D effect is astonishing," Solo said.

"It is, yes. But perhaps more so than you realize, Signor Solo. Walk out to the side there… so… and look down that side street."

The agent whistled in amazement. As he moved out wide of the picture, craning to see "down" the narrow thoroughfare in the photo, he found that in reality he was doing just that. The back of a third car, which had not been visible before, had come into sight down the side street.

Rinaldi laughed. "Yes, you really do 'see around corners' with coherent light," he said. "It's because the hologram, as it were, freezes all the existing light waves in the original scene. They are all there, waiting to be released—or melted, if you like—when the right kind of light illuminates them. And when it does, *all* the original beams, not just some as in ordinary systems of stereoscopy, come back. If a thing was there to see in the original, you will be able to find it in a hologram!"

"It's fantastic. Unbelievable."

"If I had time, I could show you more. We have a holographic television demonstration. There is an actress standing in front of her dressing table, so as to hide something on the shelf behind her. You can step to one side and peer around her to see what it is!…. There is a huge Hologram transparency which works in *ordinary* light. If you hang it in front of a window, you see a life-size portrait of a man, apparently standing solidly in space!"

"Most interesting," Solo said. "But how exactly does it…?"

"How does it affect the problems of your Mr. Waverly? Simply enough. If an operative made a hologram of a blueprint, for example, and sent it to his headquarters, it could only be deciphered if the decoders knew how it had been made. Suppose he had made it through a sheet of frosted glass. It can only be turned back into a blueprint by shining the same light at it through the same piece of glass, held in exactly the same position."

"You mean that it would remain indecipherable unless you had that exact piece of glass and knew how it had been held…?"

"Precisely. Your spy could feel quite safe if he had sent the Hologram by one route and the glass, with the instructions how to use it, by another. Even if the hologram fell into enemy hands it would be useless without the glass."

“Suppose the glass was lost—or broken, for that matter?”

“Then it would be impossible to recover the image of the original blueprint. Without the right piece of glass it would remain as a meaningless blur!”

“That’s our problem, then,” Solo said. “As I understand it, Waverly has received a hologram—but he doesn’t know what the man used to make it. And now the man has been killed and I have to try and find out what it was. If only Leonardo had written or cabled at the same time.”

“Leonardo? Are you talking of Signor Leonardo? Is this the man who has sent the hologram to Mr. Waverly?”

“Yes, that’s right. Colonel. Leonardo.”

“But… but he was here!” Rinaldi was astonished. “A week ago. He has come to see me and ask if he can borrow the ruby laser for a half hour!”

“Here!” Solo breathed. “Then if he came here to borrow your laser, he probably made the hologram here. Right in this lab!”

“Undoubtedly.”

“But then you’d know… you might have seen … Were you there while he worked the thing? In the room with him?”

The Italian shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. I have work elsewhere. I leave him in the lab and when I come back, he is gone. But at least you will know what wavelength is the light you must use—when you find your glass.”

Solo sighed. “Yes… if we find the glass. Or whatever else he used.”

Rinaldi clapped him on the shoulder. “It is a small problem compared with some of those we deal with here.”

The agent remembered his manners. “Of course, it must be, Colonel. Are you allowed to talk about your work. It must be absorbing!”

“To you, yes. In principle at least. We are working on a system of holography which would ‘translate’ human books, papers, articles or instructions extremely fast into computer ‘language’; and save all that terrible business of coding everything on to punched cards when it was necessary to reprogram.”

“So that’s what Carlsen and the girl were on about!” Solo murmured.

“There are also implications in molecular biology,” Rinaldi continued; “and we think we have found a method of using it to follow in three dimensions the movements of particles in a vapor. Calabri, over at Milano,

is working for the aviation ministry, studying the shock waves surrounding missiles or aircraft shapes by this means."

"Colonel Rinaldi," Solo said, shaking hands, "you have been more than kind. Thank you very much for your invaluable help—now, if you will forgive me, I must hurry, because I have to meet a colleague who is arriving by plane this afternoon."

"It is nothing," the Italian said, looking at his watch. "It was a pleasure, Signor Solo. From here to Caselle, the airport for Torino, should take you not more than… let me see… yes, about one hour and a half. Not more."

Solo thanked him again and left.

He threaded the little Giulietta lent to him by the S.I.D. through the succession of guarded arches which pierced the walls of the 14th-century fortress concealing the research centre, showed his papers to the sentry at the outer gate, and began winding down the mountainside towards the main road linking Sestriere and Susa.

He was approaching a hairpin about a mile below the lab when the brakes failed.

He had already changed down from top to fourth and was intending a quick double tab at the pedal before dropping down one further to third. But although he pumped madly at the pedal, the Alfa Romeo continued at the same 70 kph. He hauled on the lever between the front seats Again, nothing!

And that meant that it was the operating mechanism rather than the hydraulic system that was at fault. Which in practice meant sabotage.

Solo blipped twice, three times on the throttle pedal, double declutched, and slammed the short lever into third. The engine screamed in protest as the needle on the rev-counter spun round into the red quadrant. But the braking effect of the engine slowed the little sports car enough for him to wrestle it around the first hairpin, the open body canting over sickeningly, the tires screeching.

Beyond, the roadway dropped like a lift: a short, tremendously steep section ending in another hairpin so acute, and with so extreme an inverse camber, that even with brakes most drivers would have needed two bites at it.

Despite the engine compression, the weight of the car pushed the speed up to 65 kph again. Double declutching, Solo attempted to force the lever across and down into second. There was a hideous noise. He blipped and

tried again. It still refused to go in. And the hairpin was almost on him. With a curse, he banged it back into third and hauled on the wheel as hard as he could.

Lurching, the Giulietta ran out of the road. The tail swung out and slammed into the bank: the tires howled broadside across the carriageway; the car burst through the stone parapet backwards, rose into the air, and somersaulted down the slope in a shower of stones. It hit the bare earth of the mountainside, bounced on to another loop of road below, crashed through a second stone wall and finally crunched to a halt upside down among the rocks.

Solo had been thrown clear with the first impact. Bruised, shaken, but otherwise unhurt, he crouched behind a boulder, gripping the Berretta which had been given to him by the man in S.I.D. There was nobody to be seen. Above and behind him, the scorched slopes rose up to the fortress on its crag. In the valley far below, the milky green waters of the Dora Riparia frothed and tumbled on their way to the Po. And through a great fault gashing the mountain opposite he could see, blue with distance, the plain surrounding Turin.

Ten kilometers away, a car winked in the sunlight as it rounded a spur above the river. Across the valley, tumbled roofs of undressed slate showed among the branches of conifers encircling a hill farm. But in all that expanse, there was no other sign of human activity.

This was no cleverly timed ambush. Whoever it was that had sabotaged the car had been equally content whether Solo was killed, injured or merely delayed.

And unless he could beg, borrow, hire or conjure up from the mountain air another car very soon, lllya Kuryakin was going to have a long wait at the airport….

* See *The Finger in the Sky Affair*.

CHAPTER NINE

Two Friends And An Enemy

Caselle Airport at Turin is what the French call *mignon.* If it was not so functional, it would run the risk of being termed cute. It lies a few miles to the northeast of the city on the right of a fast, curving blacktop heading for Ivrea. There is a large, empty car park surrounded by palms and oleanders and divided by beautifully painted white lines. Beyond this, at the side of the white concrete terminal building, there is a gravelled terrace set with tables and umbrellas from which travellers' friends and members of the public can gaze through a high wire fence at the apron and at the aircraft. The terminal itself houses a freight department, a square section combining customs hall, passport control and weighing-in desks for various airlines, and a lofty cafe-bar full of airport personnel and smelling of *espresso* coffee. Above its flat roof, the duty controller stares through the green glass windows of the tower at the planes which infrequently sink into view over the Alpine foothills which form its western horizon.

Whether there are clouds or not, it always seems to be hot at Caselle. When Ilya Kuryakin arrived on the afternoon Alitalia flight from Paris, the tar on the roadway by the taxi stand was melting and the flowers banked behind the car park trembled in the heat rising from the parked vehicles. Above the mountains, the sky had dissolved in a sulphurous haze.

Finding no Solo among the small crowd of bronzed men and women waiting at the customs exit, Kuryakin made his way to the bar.

It was cooler in there, and the shutters and blinds which denied entry to the sun formed a kind of artificial dusk which gave the illusion of freshness. There were red-faced tourists from the coast, laden with striped beach balls and straw hats, waiting for the BEA flight to London; there were blue-overalled workmen and taxi drivers in shirtsleeves; there were several groups of businessmen drinking Campari-sodas and two patrician families lost in admiration of each other's children. But there was nobody there remotely resembling Napoleon Solo.

The Russian went to the airline desks one after the other to see if there had been a message left for him. There had not. Puzzled, he picked up his overnight case, slung his unwanted raincoat over one shoulder, and left the terminal building for the sun. It was like a furnace outside. The red, white and green flag hung limply from the mast. The crimson oleander flowers drooped. The weight of the raincoat immediately stuck Kuryakin's shirt to his shoulder.

"Mr. Kuryakin?"

The girl's voice had come from behind him. Illya swung round to see a tall, slender brunette in a tan shirt and turquoise silk trousers. She was standing in the shade of the awning over the main entrance and she was holding a scrap of paper.

"Mr. Kuryakin?" she said again. She had a cool and pleasant voice and a wide smile. "I have a message for you from Mr. Solo."

"Oh… Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Not at all. Just an annoyance—but an exasperating one even so. Mr. Solo's car has broken down… I'm afraid our transport people must have allotted him one that was in need of a service… and since he couldn't get here in time himself, and I was up in the city anyway, he asked me to meet you instead and give you a lift to where he's staying."

"That's extremely kind," the Russian said. "Where is he, then?"

"It's not far. About 45 kilometer along the road to Milan."

"You mentioned 'our transport people'. You will forgive me, but are you connected with the …?"

"I can't tell you here," the girl cut in. "The car's just across the road there, in the park. Let's go. It'll be cooler, anyway, once we get started." She led the way to a neat little Lancia Flavia convertible, put Illya's case and coat on the narrow back seat, and drove expertly back towards Turin.

"You were going to ask was I connected with the S.I.D.," she resumed as soon as they were clear of the airport. "The answer is in the affirmative—but I must ask you please, to be most discreet about—"

"Of course, of course. Naturally."

"I take it the situation now is that Mr. Waverly has this hologram, and Mr. Solo and you are left with the task of finding whatever it was that was used to make it?"

"You must forgive me again," Kuryakin said uncomfortably, "but I think it would be better if we left any discussion of the assignment until after I

have seen Mr. Solo."

The girl glanced in the driving mirror. A white Fiat 1500 which had been heading for the airport was impatiently trying to interrupt city-bound traffic to execute a U-turn and return the way it had come. "Just as you like," she said indifferently, "but since I have been helping Mr. Solo, to backtrack on poor Leonardo's movements before he was shot, and I understand you will be helping us on the same deal, I thought it might save time if I told you what has happened so far here. And you can tell me the latest developments from your end."

"Oh, I see. I didn't realize you—er—knew quite so much about it. Miss…?"

"Eriksson," the girl said. "Lala Eriksson."

"Miss Eriksson. But if you are in fact one of us, so to speak…"

"Hold on a moment. We're just coming to the *Pedaggio*, the pay station at the beginning of the Autostrada. I have to stop and take a ticket."

"This is the Turin-Milan Autostrada, I presume. How far along it do we go?"

"We take the fifth exit road—between Santhia and Buronzo. Mr. Solo's staked out near the place where Leonardo got his list." Lala Eriksson flicked a glance over the tail of the open car at the vehicles behind her. There was an old Alfa Romeo, a Simca with a French registration, and then a white Fiat 1500. There was nothing to show that it was the one they had seen doing the U-turn. There were thousands of them about. Nevertheless, the girl kept one eye fairly constantly on her driving mirror during the short journey along the motor road. "It's true, what Mr. Solo told me?" she asked after a little. "It's absolutely impossible to decipher this hologram without the glass or whatever it was that Leonardo used?"

"I'm afraid so," Illya said.

"That puts quite a heavy responsibility on us, then, doesn't it? Did Mr. Waverly specify the line he wanted us to take before you left?"

Kuryakin looked sideways at her. Her profile was lifted slightly and there was a smile playing around her lips. A lock of hair rose and fell irregularly as the air streamed over the windshield and fluttered the curls at the nape of her neck. "He doesn't work that way," he said. "I should have thought Napoleon would have told you."

"Mr. Solo has told me many things," Lala Eriksson said evasively. "But remember, he doesn't even know who it was that… snatched him, do you

say? Have you made any progress on that in New York?”

“Not much. A little, perhaps. Trevitt—that’s the policeman who is working with us on that end of the assignment—told me before I left that they had some hopes of getting a lead from the kidnap car.”

“They hadn’t materialized by the time you left, though?”

“Not firmly, no. They thought they might be able to trace the driver.”

“Mr. Solo thinks it was some organization… a rival to Thrush, perhaps… which was responsible. Is that what you think?”

The Russian was noncommittal. “Maybe.”

They had been driving at between 140 and 150 kph. Now the girl slowed imperceptibly until the Lancia was cruising at only 110. The white Fiat, which had been half a kilometer or more behind them all the way, did not for some reason catch them up, although the average speed of the main traffic stream was 15 or 20 kph faster than they were going. After a few minutes, Lala Eriksson speeded up again and soon they were repassing cars which had recently overtaken them. This time, however, the Fiat seemed to have no desire to match their speed and by the time they took the slip road leading to the pay station it was lost in the press of cars behind.

“How do you think we should start, then? Looking for this piece of glass, or whatever it is?” the girl asked conversationally as she handed her ticket to the attendant and searched her purse for the 650 lira he demanded.

“Oh… I should think Napoleon would be the best one to answer that,” Kuryakin replied vaguely. “He knows the terrain, after all.”

“I suppose so,” Lala Eriksson said, engaging bottom gear and moving off down a country road signposted to Buronzo.

“Don’t you think this pastoral kind of countryside is restful after all the usual southern dramatic stuff? You can certainly see why they’re called *Lombardy* poplars, can’t you!”

They were traversing a shallow valley with thickets of bamboo cane making a windbreak at either side of the road when Illya became aware of the noise from behind. The road was twisty and the high banks of vegetation cut off all rearward vision beyond the immediate corner, but it sounded like a car being driven to the limit in the intermediate gears. He tilted his head towards the Lancia’s tail to hear better Yes! He could almost be sure that he heard the squeal of tires overriding the mechanical racket.

The girl had heard it too. She had gone rather pale. She changed down and trod hard on the accelerator, hurling the Lancia into a right-hander as

though she had one lap to go and the World Championship was at stake!

Illya seized the dashboard grab-handle and hung on grimly as they slithered through a double S-bend, flashed over a bridge crossing a stream, and scraped through a closing gap between a tractor and the hedge. Another sharp bend, a climbing turn to the left, and they were screened by the bamboo once more on a short, straight stretch. The agent was staring at the girl in astonishment. Her knuckles had whitened on the polished wood rim of the wheel and she stabbed ever more frequent glances at the mirror.

The noise behind them rose to a crescendo. As Kuryakin swung round in his seat, the white Fiat sailed into view round the last corner, its front wheels scrabbling for purchase on the dusty road. The car lurched wide, sent up a puff of dust as it clipped the grass verge, slewed back to the near side, and thundered up to the Lancia's rear.

A moment later, the saloon drew level with a crackle of exhaust and began slowly to forge ahead.

For seconds the two cars jockeyed for position on the narrow roadway. And then the Fiat began remorselessly to crowd the convertible towards the palisade of canes. The, girl swore viciously and stamped on her brakes.

Shuddering, the little Lancia lost way—and then the wheels locked, there was a scream of tortured metal as the offside front wing sheared along the Fiat's nearside quarter, and the convertible spun across the road to stall with its battered tail wedged deep in the bamboo.

Kuryakin had been thrown against the padded facia. As he struggled to recover his breath, he was astonished to find his own raincoat thrown over his head while Lala Eriksson vaulted over the side of the car and vanished into the thicket. Spluttering, he fought his way free and was about to leap after her into the waving canes when the driver of the Fiat, which had stopped on the far side of the road, sprinted across, a Berretta automatic in his hand.

"Forget it!" he called. "Bringing her in's not so important as getting you out"

It was Napoleon Solo.

CHAPTER TEN

Finding Out The Facts

Because—in spite of his name—Leonardo had in fact been of Dutch nationality, Solo and Illya found that his murder was being handled by a special branch of the Turin police allied with the S.I.D. In the evening of the day on which Solo had rescued the Russian from a fate worse than death at the home of Carlsen and Lala Eriksson, they sat talking to a very fat and friendly member of its hierarchy.

"So you see, *Commendatore,"* Solo said after he had explained the events leading up to their presence in the city, "exactly why it is so important to us to find out all we can about the killing of Signor Leonardo —and why we should welcome… I correct myself: why we should prostrate ourselves to receive!… all the help we can get in the matter of unravelling his final actions."

The *Commendatore* wore a beautiful sharkskin suit over his white shirt. He had changed every stitch he wore one hour previously. But it had been a hot day even for Torino, and he wished at all costs to avoid giving offense to these gentlemen from that hygienic paradise across the sea. He took out a large silk handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead, which was beaded with perspiration, stole a surreptitious glance below the arms of his jacket, which was not, and hoped for the tenth time that his men had not been too perfunctory in their enquiry. If only someone had *said* that the wretched Dutchman had been employed by this high-powered international organization….

He brushed the handkerchief across the ends of his luxuriant black moustache—which somehow seemed to give him more reason for having taken it out—and picked up a folder from his desk. He cleared his throat importantly.

"Alora, the facts of the case, gentlemen, the facts," he said, "are that Mynheer Leonardo was shot down by a marksman with a rifle. And what a marksman! He was standing by a window of the fifth floor landing on the

emergency staircase of a block of flats. Behind the block is a vacant lot surrounded by board fences. And beyond the lot is the Corso Alessandro, where finds itself the post office branch in front of which he was assassinated."

"That's beyond doubt, is it—the locale?" Solo asked.

"*Si*, *si*. There are three cartridges, spent, on the floor of the landing. .303, probably, the experts tell me, fired from an English target rifle called the P14. And this checks because two bullets have enter his head, poor man, and a third have make a chip in the doorway of the post office on the Corso Alessandro."

"I suppose nobody saw him in the apartment block… on the stairs or anything?"

"But no. The block he is unfinished—that is to say he is finish, but nobody live there yet. All the flats are empty and the doors to the entrance are not yet being installed."

"I see. Anyone could have got in, in fact. What about witnesses to the shooting itself? You have many people who saw him fall?"

"Many, many people. The two ladies in the flower shop. The man and his wife who operate the tobacco kiosk. The blind seller of matches beside. The girl—Ah, signori! That *girl!*—who has the tie shop. The newspaper vendor. Passers-by. Many people."

"Witnesses, I suppose," Illya put in, "to the fact that he fell down and died in the street outside the post office? Presumably nobody actually heard, still less saw, the shot itself?"

"Aha!" the *Commendatore* was delighted. "But you are wrong, Signor Kuryakin! Wrong! There *was* one witness who happened to be looking towards the new block and observed the three puffs of smoke. He was confident enough, our killer, not to use smokeless powder!—and then. Just as Mynheer Leonardo fell to the sidewalk, remarked the noise of the shots. Otherwise—and I am honest with you, gentlemen!—we might still be looking for the place where the shots were fired. There are many tall buildings around, and he spun as he fell so we could not have told from which direction the shots come."

"And the witness?" Solo prompted.

"A lady. She was descending the steps of the post office as the murdered man was about to ascend. That is how we know he was entering and not leaving or just passing by."

“He was actually on the steps. I see. But he didn’t have anything at all with him? No packet fell? There was no letter, no piece of paper, no cable form? Nobody could have approached the body and taken anything?”

“No to all questions,” the *Commendatore* said.

“I guess he was going to send a cable in code, telling Waverly what he had used to make the Hologram, and he’d memorized the code,” said Illya.

“I expect you’re right. This piece of glass, *Commendatore.*… no doubt you realize this is as important to us as finding out who killed our colleague?”

“Evidently.”

“He must have put it somewhere, somewhere safe. Because he would have known that we must have it—that it must therefore be easily reached and available to us—and yet hidden from others.”

“Clearly. Yet we found nothing. Nothing at all in his apartment, his car, his pockets—even a safe deposit box that we have traced.”

“You have been unbelievably efficient,” Solo said. “Naturally we do not wish to cover the same ground that your men have so painstakingly investigated. Yet—purely so that we can inhale, as it were, the atmosphere, the ambience of Leonardo’s life and surroundings—we should very much like to spend a short while… a half hour at the most… in his apartment, if possible. Would it be trespassing too much on your already over-strained kindness to ask you to arrange this?”

“Perfectly. That is to say… you only have to ask,” the Italian smiled.

“You are more than kind,” Kuryakin said, taking his cue from Solo.

Later, as they left the building armed with a list of the names of witnesses and their addresses, the key to Leonardo’s apartment, and a transcript of all the evidence so far taken, Illya said; “The last time I left a building to interrogate a witness to a crime, some kind gentlemen almost put an end to my career with a bomb as I crossed the road!”

“And just when was that?” Solo asked with a grin. “And what was the crime?”

“It was less than a week ago, Napoleon,” the Russian said as they waited to cross the road. “Here… we have plenty of time before that bus comes. And the crime, you ask? It was nothing less than your own kidnapping!”

“Good Lord!” Solo said. “I had no idea my snatch was so important! You must brief me some time on the New York end of this particular

comedy. I'm just a little hazy about what happened before I woke up here in Italy—"

His words were torn from his lips as Kuryakin seized his arm and literally hurled him against the side of a delivery truck that was drawn up on the far side of the street. Solo crashed against the steel panels with his shoulder, staggered, and sat down abruptly in the road. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kuryakin rolling over and over in the dust as the big closed car roared past in low gear, missing them both by inches.

"If we needed any proof that your kidnapping and my assignment are related," Illya gasped as Solo helped him to his feet, "that was it! Trying the same trick twice is a little naughty, though… even if it was with a different weapon.

They dusted each other off, politely refused offers of assistance and descriptions of the car that had nearly run them down, and pushed through the crowd of passers-by who had witnessed the affair. They were about to enter an alleyway leading to the square where Solo's car was parked when a girl stepped out of a recessed doorway and blocked their path.

"You were quite right not to waste time with witnesses," she said. "The number plate was undoubtedly false—and there are a very large number of big secondhand American cars of that type in Torino."

Solo looked at her. It was an agreeable task. There was a burnt-orange shantung dress, with a taut, full figure underneath it; black patent shoes with square toes and block heels; a matching handbag and white kid gloves. From the wide-set collar of the dress, the girl's shoulders and neck emerged flower-like to support a head reminiscent of a dark and slightly petulant Madonna. "I'm sorry," he said, smiling, "and I wish I had reason to mean this another way… but I'm afraid you have the advantage of me!"

"Of us," Illya Kuryakin corrected.

In her turn, the girl smiled. There was a great deal of make-up on her eyes, lovingly applied; none at all on her mouth or on the flawless planes of her cheeks. "A branch of the Defense Department labelled S.I.D.," she explained in a low voice.

Solo looked up at her from under his brows. "I find it goes against the grain to question a lady," he said, "and I can hardly ask you to produce secret credentials in the street. But nevertheless… "

The girl laid a gloved hand on his arm. "Understood, Signor Solo; but perhaps I can set your fears at rest without an exchange of papers!…. After

my colleague Rossi was delegated to furnish you, yesterday, with clothes, papers, money, a Berretta and a Giulietta—the 1300 ex. *decapolable* one—I was instructed to keep what my chief calls a 'benevolent watching' brief on you! I have since then observed the following:

"You are staying at the Hotel Europa on the Via Pascal. Last night you retired early after eating in the hotel. You drove out to see Colonel Rinaldi this morning. While you were at the research station, somebody tampered with the braking system of your car and you had an accident on the way back to the Route 24, leading to Susa. The car was spoiled, but you were fortunately not."

"Thank you very much," Solo said drily. "I take it your brief doesn't extend to issuing warnings or lending a hand?"

"Ah, you mock me! But I am watching with binoculars from the other side of the valley. There is a *bergerie* there and I am inside it. But there was nothing I could do at the time So. You climb back up to the Colonel and you borrow a Fiat 1500 from him—one that has been slightly *gonfie*, as the French say, which is to say in English, converted. She is very fast, but you are still too late to meet your friend here at the airport.

"On the way to Caselle, though, you see him being driven away by a lady you know as the Signorina Eriksson. You guess what must be happening and you turn around and follow that couple. After they leave the Autostrada, you catch them up and in a place near to Buronzo you force their car to leave the road. Miss Eriksson escapes and you bring your friend back to the city. And then you call upon the *Commendatore*… this most aggravating plot used against you as you emerge from there. Now—my name is Giovanna del Renzio. I am here to help you. What can I do?"

"Take us at once to a restaurant near here," Kuryakin said feelingly, "where we can exchange notes, plan what to do next—and eat. Above all, eat!"

"But of course! We shall go to Angelo's. It is only just one block."

And while they attended to a vast *fritto misto* with *peperoni alia piemontese* on the side, Illya sat below an oak beam groaning with pendant cheeses, strings of garlic, Parma beans and sausages, telling Solo and the girl the burden of Waverly's theorizing the previous day.

"So, if I may recap, what it amounts to is this," Solo said finally, pouring the last of the Barbaresco into Giovanna's glass and signalling the waiter to bring more. "Leonardo acquires the list of intended Thrush satraps

in Europe. He takes a copy and puts the original back in the safe of the Council Member (who may or may not be Carlsen). Then he visits Colonel Rinaldi and borrows the ruby laser to make a hologram of the list—which he immediately mails to Waverly. That's the initial bit, isn't it? Before I came in?"

Kuryakin nodded. "That's it exactly, Napoleon."

"Fine. He still has, however, the piece of semi-reflective substance which was used in conjunction with the laser beam to make that hologram. Somehow or other, he conceals this—and while he is on his way to let Waverly know what it is and where it is, he is killed, one assumes by agents of Thrush who have discovered the theft and know who is responsible. Are you with me?"

Again the Russian nodded. "In the meantime, though," he said, "either Thrush or a rival organization which is as keen to have that list as we are decides to kidnap you from New York in the hope that they can force from you certain facts: one, whether Leonardo used a hologram and, if so, whether it was sent to Waverly; two, whether or not Waverly has been able to decode it, if he *does* have it; three, what is the U.N.C.L.E. routine in such matters."

"Do you have any idea if it really *is* Thrush or not?" Giovanna del Renzio asked.

Solo, exchanging a glance with Kuryakin, pursed his lips and shook his head. "The conversations I had at Carlsen's house would suggest the latter case," he said. "And the killing of Leonardo followed by my kidnapping make more sense if they were done by different teams. If it was the same lot, you'd think they would have captured Leonardo and forced *him* to talk before they tried me! But if not, then Carlsen might not have known it *was* Leonardo who stole the list, you see…. Only that it had been stolen and probably sent to New York."

"I see what you mean."

"On the other hand," Solo shrugged. "Does it really seem *likely* that there would be another organization—one that none of us has ever heard of—which could have found out sufficient facts about Leonardo's assignment to justify the action that has been taken?"

"I guess not," Kuryakin said slowly. "Unless, of course, Leonardo himself was a part of it. But from my own knowledge of the man—and Waverly agrees—that would be so unlikely as to seem impossible."

“Whichever it is, it appears to have been Carlsen who was responsible for doctoring my borrowed car at Rinaldi’s place. For it seems to me obvious that the only aim of that operation was to stop me meeting Illya—so that they could put in Miss Eriksson and take him off to the country house to be drugged and interrogated in his turn. How much did she find out before I caught up, Illya?”

“Enough to make me feel an idiot,” the Russian said bitterly. “Mainly, I confirmed for them that there *was* a hologram, that it *had* been received, and that Leonardo *hadn’t* specified the key for reproducing it. She also wanted to know what we thought about the case and how we proposed to work—but fortunately I stalled off those.”

“Where do you suppose Leonardo did hide the glass or whatever it was?” the girl asked. “Mightn’t he have mailed that to New York too, from another office?”

Kuryakin shook his head. “It would have arrived by now. He might have mailed it to himself, though—either *poste restante* or to another address. He might have sent it to a friend, or hidden it. The murderers might even have it!”

“Oh, I doubt that!” Solo protested. “They’d hardly be trying to run us down in the street if they already had it. After all, they only have two objectives: either to stop us finding it, or to stop us getting to Waverly with it if we do find it. If they had it already—”

“That’s all very well if it’s only one organization involved,” Illya argued. “But if there should after all be two… one might have found the thing, and the other, not knowing this, might still be trying to prevent *us* finding it.”

“I see what you mean. My general point is worth emphasising, though: given that this list is vital—for its decoding, from our point of view; for the prevention of this, from the others’—then they have much the easiest task. We have to locate the glass or whatever it is and after that convey it safely all the way back to New York, and then discover how it was used and repeat those conditions, before we can say we’ve succeeded. All they have to do is destroy it.”

“It looks as though the dice are charged against us, then!” Illya said.

“Loaded,” Solo corrected automatically. “Talking of which, let’s get out of here before this Barbaresco seduces me into ordering a third bottle!”

“Where are you going now?” the girl asked.

“We’ll have a look at Leonardo’s apartment first. It’s the obvious place and I’ve no doubt both the police and the opposition have already turned it over thoroughly. But you can never take anything for granted in this business; you just have to check.”

“Where did he live?”

“An apartment block…,” Solo consulted the sheaf of papers he had won from *the Commendatore* “…in the Corso Svizzere. Do you know it?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll take you there. Your car is nearby, isn’t it?”

They edged their way out of the oak-benched booth with its red check tablecloth and ceramic condiment set. While Solo paid the bill, a fleshy man with a sallow, blue-chinned face threw a handful of notes on to the table in the adjoining compartment and hurried out ahead of them.

There were two *carabinieri* deep in conversation on the opposite side of the road when they left. In the square where the Fiat was parked, a nondescript man carrying a raincoat raised one eyebrow a fraction of an inch at the girl as they passed. And two youths apparently lounging against a fountain only straightened up and moved away as Solo started the motor and steered the car out from the kerb. *“II Commendatore,* I see, likes to make sure that his—er—guests are well looked after,” he remarked with a crooked grin.

“But of course,” the girl said. “These are determined people—whoever they are. They will undoubtedly try again. And although we bow to nobody in our admiration of your efficiency, it has to be admitted that this is our home ground. I am sure that the *Commendatore* feels simply that there may be angles unknown to you which we may cover just by being there. As your English proverb has it—a stitch before it is too late, will avoid the use of eight.”

“A knit in time saves *nine”* Kuryakin corrected reprovingly.

Napoleon Solo burst out laughing. “So much for my English proverb,” he said. “What about these lights, now? Which way for the Corso Svizzere?”

Leonardo’s cover occupation had been as an accountant specializing in American company law. The neat two-room apartment he had lived in was on the tenth floor of a new tower block. The bedroom held a well-chosen selection of clothes just a little on the flashy side, a cupboard full of linen, drawers of shirts, ties, socks, underwear, a pile of freshly laundered handkerchiefs on top of a signed photograph of a girl. The kitchen had been

strictly a bachelor one: coffee and fruit juice in the mornings, ice for the drinks, and that was it! And the living room was full of paper. Statements, brochures, prospectuses, accounts sheets and reams and reams of notes overflowed the desk, littered the bookshelves, covered the occasional tables and the dining table, and even dotted the top of a comprehensive hi-fi complex.

But of half-silvered mirrors; sheets of ground glass, frosted glass inserts or portions of semi-transparent plastic they found no trace at all.

After they had spent more than an hour emptying and refilling drawers, cupboards and bookshelves. Solo shook his head and walked to the deep windows. He slid back a glass door and walked out on to a small concrete balcony covered in pots and boxes and *jardinieres* of geraniums. Below, the glittering lights of Turin mapped the city against the dark.

"I guess we're wasting our time," he said over his shoulder. "The place has been done over by the police and the others, as I said. There's nothing here they would have missed. There isn't a mirror in the place that's not a fixture … not even one of those round shaving ones most people seem to have."

Kuryakin walked up to the french window and leaned on the jamb. "What about the photo of that girl?" he asked. "You don't think…?"

"It's all in the dossier the *Commendatore* gave me. She's the daughter of an hotelier with whom Leonardo stayed whenever he went to Bordeaux. They seem to have had an *affaire.* Period."

"She hasn't received any… packages… with an Italian postmark in the last few days?" the girl asked.

Solo grinned. "They even thought of that. And the answer's no again!"

"What about any other friends or contacts he has over here?" Kuryakin said.

"I asked a special favor of the *Commendatore.* He has a squad of men investigating it on behalf of the Command. But I don't anticipate any results there; somehow I believe it's going to be something far more simple. After all, Leonardo had to use something that nobody would notice—and that would be equally easy both to hide afterwards and to find again—didn't he?"

"I guess so. Well… if there's nothing here, I suppose we might as well make ourselves rare."

“Scarce,” Solo said. “Rare is what they make steak and what diamonds make themselves. Okay; let’s go.”

They relocked the apartment and trooped out into the carpeted corridor. Apart from the bulky back of a man disappearing through the glass doors leading to the stairs, it was deserted. Solo approached the lifts and pressed the central button between the two sets of gates. There was a car already at the tenth floor and the grooved aluminum portals slid aside with a faint rumble. He was about to hand Giovanna into the brightly lit interior of the cage when Kuryakin laid a hand on his arm. “Just a moment,” the Russian said. “That man we saw… why would someone ride to the tenth floor in a lift, get out, and then immediately take the stairs and go down again?”

“Because he’d meant to press the button for the ninth,” Solo said.

“It would be easier to stay inside. This is not an express lift that won’t stop at some floors. Let’s just see… the other one will be here in a moment.”

He leaned inside the car, pressed the button for the ground floor, and then ducked out again as the hydraulically operated bar slid the doors shut. The inner gates rumbled together, they heard the whine of machinery as the car began to descend; the indicator arrow above the lifts sank from 10 past 9 to 8. “Suspicious,” Solo said. “That’s what you are! Now you’ve delayed __”

Something twanged, twice, beyond the doors with enormous force. With an impact that appeared to shiver the building, a metallic thunderclap struck the far side of the grooved aluminum. There was a subdued rushing noise, rising to a crescendo, from within the shaft. Gear wheels, freed of their load, shrieked up the scale.

Far below, there was a splintering crash which echoed up the empty lift well as the car, its twin steel hawsers sheared, plummeted 160 feet to the winch housing at the bottom of the shaft.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Rare Stake!

The researches of the S.I.D. into Leonardo's contacts and friends drew as much of a blank as had Solo and Illya's abortive visit to the dead man's flat. The men from U.N.C.L.E. decided to leave that particular angle: they were most unlikely, in a foreign country, to improve on a routine job where the local operatives had been unable to succeed.

After a talk with Waverly on the scrambler radio-telephone, they elected to play it cool. No known contacts of the murdered operative had received any package from him that might be the missing medium through which he had shot the hologram that Waverly so urgently wanted decoded. An exhaustive search through all the *poste restante* offices in northern Italy had yielded nothing. It followed therefore, both Solo and Illya thought, that there must be some thing, some little thing perhaps, which they had either overlooked or knew nothing about. If they played a waiting game, this could conceivably reveal itself.

Whatever else happened, it was certain that the opposition were as ignorant of the nature and the whereabouts of the… what *could* it be?… as they were themselves. Had they located and destroyed it, there would be no need to keep up the flood of attempts on the lives of Illya and Solo!

For the affair of the lift was by no means the last. The following morning, Illya discovered and defused a booby-trap bomb concealed in the packaging of a bouquet of flowers delivered to their hotel room. And, a little later, it was Solo's turn to dismantle a Mafia-style device linking a veritable landmine to the starter circuit of his borrowed Fiat. So far as the lift itself went, police investigators told them that, after the hawsers had been sawn almost through, a peculiarly neat electrical modification to the mechanism had ensured that the remaining strands would part a few seconds after the cage was operated in a downward direction.

And then, as they were on their way to hold a conference with Giovanna del Renzio, a group of thugs attacked them in an arcade between two busy

streets. It was all over very quickly. There were five of the attackers; and unfortunately for them, Solo had just drawn Illya's attention to some object in a curved shop window when they decided to make their rush. The two agents therefore not only saw them coming but had time, watching the reflections, to make a plan of action.

The thugs poured into the arcade from the entry to an apartment house half way along it. An instant before the ugly rush of feet was upon them, the men from U.N.C.L.E.—still with their backs to the attack—leaped as one man for the decorative wrought-ironwork which embellished the projecting window of the boutique.

Guided by the distorted images in the glass, they lashed backwards with their heels and sent two of the attackers reeling to the marble floor of the arcade before they could realize what was happening.

Then, still hanging from the pendant tracery of iron overhead, they swung out over the hunched shoulders of the remaining three and dropped to the ground behind them. One burly man came for Illya with an iron bar; the other two whirled round and went for Solo with knuckledusters and coshes.

The Russian swayed to one side, bent forward, and reached for the hairy wrist wielding the bar. There was a sharp jerk, a cry of astonishment, and then an almighty clatter as the man sailed over his shoulder and broke the window of another boutique with his head. Great shards of glass were still tinkling to the marble floor as Kuryakin turned his attention to the couple who were attacking Solo. The agent was on the ground, fending off feet with feet as he struggled to disentangle his Berretta from the folds of his jacket.

From behind, Illya crooked an arm around the neck of one man as he chopped in a karate blow to the kidney. The thug grunted with pain and went limp. Solo had in the meantime seized an ankle, twisted sharply, and upset the other man as he himself jumped to his feet. A moment later, the arcade was empty. The four fallen men scrambled to their feet cursing, dragged the fifth from the shattered window, and ran with him to the street. Only an irregular trail of scarlet on the marble testified to the short, violent battle that had just ended. Panting, the two agents straightened their collars and continued on their way. "But that's just one more reason why we feel," Solo told the girl later, "that it might be best to stake ourselves out near the murder spot for a day or two and watch the crowds go by. You never know.

Among the regulars who pass each day, there may be someone who can tell us something… maybe somebody who knows something without even being aware of it."

"Because, you see, we have to do something," Kuryakin added. "We simply have to find what it was that Leonardo used to make this hologram. For without that, the list it records will remain forever a secret; Thrush will be able to push on with its plans unchecked; and all Leonardo's work will have been in vain."

"I guess you're right," the girl said. "But I'm afraid you may have a long wait."

In the event, it was decided that Solo and Illya should keep watch together. They would see more if they were separated; but they would not be able to check their impressions one against the other until they met again. And however often this was, it was bound to lose them the immediacy they would gain if they pooled impressions on the spot as things happened. There was a tiny office to let on the first floor of an old building almost immediately opposite the post office, and after a few discreet telephone calls from the office of the *Commendatore,* they found themselves the temporary tenants of this.

Giovanna, with the permission and connivance of the S.I.D., was to act as liaison between them and the office, carry out any follow-up chores that might arise, and generally stay on a roving patrol in the neighborhood.

On the following morning, the two agents installed themselves at a desk in the window of the office. In front of them, a specially ordered pane of glass revealed the street but concealed them from anyone who might be watching. Beside them were cameras, tape machines binoculars and a selection of curious electronic devices perfected by the Command's laboratory technicians in New York; and behind them on a chair were transcripts of the *Commendatore's* dossier on the Leonardo case. Plus a large Thermos of coffee.

By the evening of that day, they had identified many of the witnesses whose testimony they could read in these xeroxed sheets—the fat man and his even fatter wife who ran the tobacco kiosk let into the post office wall opposite, the uniformed war veteran who opened and closed the post office doors, a lean man who walked up and down selling papers, the curvaceous and come-hither redhead with the tie shop next door, the blind matchseller who sat all day on the sidewalk outside the kiosk, the three waiters at the

cafe-bar on the corner and the sloe-eyed, bosomy girl who operated its *espresso* machine, and the two smart, bespectacled women who owned the flower shop immediately underneath their office.

Twenty four hours later, they had begun to recognize many of the "regulars" from the office buildings around.

They knew that the post office doorman became angry if customers stayed too long after the door was supposed to be closed at noon and he missed his usual corner seat at the bar during the lunch hour. They recognized most of the typists and clerks who took an aperitif and a sandwich at the cafe. They had noted the number of the Savona-registered Maserati in which a dark, smooth young man called for the girl who ran the tie boutique every lunchtime and evening. And they had been told by the concierge that—despite their airs and graces—the flower ladies below were doing so badly that they brought their own lunch in a paper bag and ate it behind the closed shutters as they took turns to cross the road and bring back from the cafe the smallest possible amount of hot chocolate in a jug. They could tell, also, which taxi it was that was calling to take home the blind man, and which one had been ordered to help with the shopping by the wife of the man who ran the kiosk.

What they did not know was anything more about the killing of Leonardo.

On the third day. Solo sighed and took the binoculars away from his eyes at eleven thirty. "We could get them to send our retirement pensions here," he said. "This is getting us nowhere, Illya. Let's vary the thing a bit, eh?"

"Alter the routine, you mean?"

"Exactly. Let's check up the characters we see, when we see them, with the statements they gave the police after the murder. We'll see if they fit the *ambience* of their statements! You keep a lookout and tell me who you see; I'll look up what they said—and we can both decide if it sounds right!"

"The porter has come out on to the steps to look at the sky," Illya reported a few minutes later. "He shakes his head. He thinks it will rain. So do I."

Solo flipped over pages. "Let's see… porter… Here we are!" he said. "I quote. 'Hearing a disturbance on the steps, I went out and saw a small crowd of people at the bottom of the flight. Some were on the steps and some still on the sidewalk. They were gathered round a tall man who had

been coming into the post office and had fallen back down the stairs so that his head was now on the pavement. He was cleanshaven and his eyes were open. I could see that he was dead. There was plaster on the steps and blood underneath the man."

"That seems to stack up very well with the man I can see," Kuryakin said. "Old soldier trained to observe. Crisp, factual comments. Eye for detail."

"Yes. I guess the plaster was the result of the third bullet; the one that missed him… what is it?"

"Another customer. The wider of the flower shop ladies is going to get her chocolate."

Solo consulted his list again. "The wider one. That'd be Signora Rastoldi… 'I heard my cousin cry out. I looked up. A tall man in dark glasses was lurching about on the post office steps across the road. He sat down suddenly and fell back into the road. Then people rushed up and I couldn't see any more'."

Twenty minutes later, Kuryakin said: "Glamour girl's boyfriend has arrived in the Maserati. She's locking up the shop and getting into the car."

"On the day Leonardo was killed," Solo said, "she went to the post office first to register some letters before lunch. Estrellita Palomari… 'I heard what I thought was a backfire. I thought my friend's car was perhaps being temperamental, again, but when I reached the steps there was this man lying there with people all around. He was on his back sort of staring at the sky. Somebody told me he was dead."

"The porter has closed the doors," the Russian said a little later. "He has bought his usual box of matches from the blind man… now he's at the cafe."

"Did they take evidence from the blind man?… Ah, yes!… 'There was a clatter and a thump from just beyond where I sit. Something heavy fell down the stairs… footsteps dashed up and someone said send for an ambulance. It was some time before I could catch anyone's attention to ask what had happened.'… Now let's see—I know she's not there just now—how it looked to someone who *saw* it all. 'I noticed a tall man in sunglasses coming up the stairs towards me. I happened to glance up over his head and I saw three puffs of smoke, one after another, float away from a window of the new apartment block beyond the lot across the road. It was blue smoke.

“I imagine there was about ten seconds between the first puff and the last. I heard the sound of the three shots just as the man gave a kind of cough and fell against the wall. Then he sat down and fell back into the street. My dress was covered in plaster dust and something stung my cheek’.”

“That’s the housewife the *Commendatore* was talking about?”

“Yes; Signora Rastafia. Do you notice anything so far?”

“About the various statements? You mean…?” Illya sketched a gesture in front of his face with both hands.

“Yes. I mean,” Solo said grimly. “There’s a discrepancy, isn’t there? But before we get our teeth into it, let’s have a look through the glasses.”

He took the binoculars and scanned the street below. “Think of the evidence and look carefully,” he said at last. “‘On the left, there’s a little entry leading through an arch to a warehouse or something…”

“It’s where the post office vans go in and out, actually.”

“So it is. Thanks, Illya. Then comes the tie boutique. Then the body of the post office itself, with the stairs leading to the doors on the right. The matchseller sits with his back to the right-hand pillar framing the stairs. Immediately beyond him is the tobacco kiosk, then double doors leading to offices, apartments, and so on. The news vendor’s stand. And finally the cafe-bar on the next corner…”

Solo paused suddenly, sharpening the focus of the glasses with the centre finger of his right hand. “Illya,” he said urgently, “quick! Do you see that big man coming down the steps there? *There* now he’s turned towards the cafe… He’s stopped to buy cigarettes at the kiosk!… Get after him, boy. That’s our Mr. Carlsen! He knows me but he won’t know you from Adam unless he meets the girl who met you at Caselle. Don’t worry about making contact. Get after him and see what you can find out!”

After one long glance into the street to fix the image of Carlsen in his mind, the Russian slipped out and sped down the staircase into the street.

Solo continued watching. At twelve thirty, Giovanna came up to relieve him for lunch and he went across the road to the cafe. After a couple of abortive attempts, he managed to engage one of the waiters in conversation and obtain yet another eyewitness account of the death of Leonardo.

Before he went back to the office hideout, he made one telephone call. After he had given Solo the information he wanted, the man at the other end relayed a message from Waverly in New York.

The agent returned to his eyrie satisfied enough and released the girl to continue her freelance patrol.

At ten past four, Illya Kuryakin returned, flushed with success. Panting, he dropped into a chair and drew an envelope covered in scribbled notes from his hip pocket. “It wasn’t too difficult at first. Napoleon,” he said, “especially as Carlsen doesn’t know me by sight and had no reason to think he was being followed anyway.”

“Don’t underestimate him, though, that’s all!” Solo said. “He’s smart.”

“So I found out. He bought a paper after I picked him up, and then he went to have lunch—at the same place we were at the other evening.”

“Angelo’s?”

“That’s it. He ordered an aperitif and read the paper for a while. Then, around one fifteen, he chose his lunch and began to eat. At… let me see… yes, at one forty, he was joined by—you’ll never guess who.”

“The man we saw going away from the lifts in Leonardo’s apartment block.”

Kuryakin looked quite put out. “However did you guess?” he complained.

“It was a reasonable deduction. We thought it was the man we’d seen leaving Angelo’s from the next booth to ours when the lift incident happened. Now here you are at the restaurant again. And anyway, there’s nobody else in the cast it could be, Illya!”

“I suppose not. Anyway, he came in and sat down at Carlsen’s table and began to have his lunch too. They seemed quite intimate, on quite good terms.”

“You weren’t able by any chance, I suppose, to—”

“To hear what they were saying? No, I’m afraid not. I said he was smart. He had chosen a table… You know they have that piped music relayed by speakers here and there about the room at Angelo’s?… Well, he had chosen a table right under one of the blasted things and I couldn’t make out a word!”

Solo grinned. “Okay. One to him. What happened then?”

“I managed to grab a taxi when they left, and I followed them from the restaurant to a car park, and from there to a huge new block of luxury flats out on the southwest side of town, near the Fiat factory. Carlsen parked his Cadillac out front and they rode up to the seventeenth floor.”

“And you rode with them?”

“No. There was an indicator. There are only two apartments to a floor when you go above, the twelfth—it’s one of those multi-tower places after that. I found out easily enough which apartment they were in and I listened —”

“Hey, hey, hey! Just a minute there! You blithely say you *listened.*.. but how did you get there *to* listen? Ring at the bell and say you were the gas man?”

“Er … no. The painter.”

“The…?”

“The painter. There was a cradle, you see, hanging down the side of the tower from the top. And in Italy workmen don’t return from their siesta until around four. And so I—er—borrowed it.”

“And you hung in mid-air just outside their window, which they had obligingly opened,” Solo said affectionately, “and listened to everything they said?”

“No, no. Not exactly. I maneuvered the cradle one apartment to the side and one floor down, so if they did look out to check it wasn’t too near.”

“But you wouldn’t hear anything there, man!”

“Not directly, no. But I had had an ER/2 with me and somehow—er—it seemed to have found its way into Carlsen’s jacket pocket at lunchtime… “

Solo laughed. “Well, you really take the cake, Illya, for sheer effrontery!” he said. “It worked all right? You were not out of range down there?” The tiny transistorized bugs would normally pick up a conversation within ten to twelve feet of where they were lodged and, provided the listener had the right equipment to receive it, would broadcast this a distance of a further thirty to forty feet, according to conditions.

“It received very well, thank you. Carlsen seemed to be in the middle of a kind of briefing when I first tuned in. He said…” The Russian turned back to his notes once more “… that the other man, the blue-chinned one we saw at the lifts, must lay off the murder attempts for the time being. All plans for assassinating the men from U.N.C.L.E. were to be held in abeyance. That meant us, Napoleon. It felt awfully funny hearing it, you know.”

“It must have done, yes. I’m falling about.”

“He said that now they had confirmed that a hologram had been made and was in New York, but that we hadn’t yet found out *how* it had been shot and had so far not succeeded in tracing the medium, then it was more to their advantage to lie low and wait. They could allow us, this way, to do all

the work and actually locate the medium—and then they could destroy it, and us, at their leisure."

"Charming! And what happened then?"

"The grey man—I'm sure he's local talent, you know: a small time chiseller cashing in on the big time—he said okay, Carlsen was the one who was hiring his services; if that was the way he wanted it, then he'd pull out his men and wait until he was asked for. And Carlsen said, great! That was what he did want: it would be much better that way, letting us do all the work; and anyway, since he had now got us so well-covered, the killing bit wasn't so important."

"That's a bit ominous, that one about having us so well covered. What do you make of that, Mr. Eavesdropper? Did they say anything more on that kick?"

"Er… well, you see, there was a bit of a fracas just then. One of the painters came back from his lunch and there was some dispute as to who had the right to occupy the cradle. And then he called a few of his mates and… well, since I didn't want to attract the attention of the people in the apartment, I thought it best to—er—leave."

"I have a suspicion that I've just heard the understatement of the decade, but let it pass! I'm glad to hear that the heat's off, though—for I, too, have news."

"You've seen something important?"

"Not seen. Heard. And it wasn't from this little love nest: it was on the telephone, while Giovanna was relieving me at lunch time."

"On the phone? Not from Waverly?"

Solo nodded. "Just a message. The *Commendatore* told me that New York had left word that your friend Trevitt has definitely tied the kidnap car in with a known Thrush member."

"So that means we are dealing with one adversary… not two?"

"Exactly. And it also means that Carlsen and Lala Eriksson are Thrush since they were behind the snatch. And it means, for good measure, that Carlsen must moreover be the Supreme Council Member for Southern Europe—and of course that it was from the house where I was kept that Leonardo stole the list."

Kuryakin gave a low whistle. "It certainly simplifies the scene; but I can't say it makes me wild with joy, all the same!"

“No. They’re playing for the highest stakes, so they’ll be bound to play it rough. But we have something to go on at last. I told you I was glad the heat was off because I wanted to act. I haven’t yet told you why … for there was one thing more I learned from the *Commendatore.”*

“And that was?”

“I asked him a question. His answer was… that the body of Leonardo, when it was brought to the morgue, was without glasses.”

“But… but. Napoleon…”

Solo inclined his head. He picked up the S.I.D. dossier and leafed through it again. “I know… ‘He was cleanshaven and his eyes were open’—that’s the porter… ‘He was on his back, sort of staring at the sky’—that’s the beauty from the tie shop… and yet Signora Rastoldi speaks of a ‘tall man in dark glasses’ lurching about on the steps, and the woman who saw the smoke from the gun also mentions ‘a tall man in sunglasses’ coming towards her. What do you make of that?”

“If he was wearing glasses, especially sunglasses, the witnesses would hardly have noticed whether his eyes were open, or whether he was staring at the sky.”

“Exactly. And the statements which mention the glasses are those from people who were in at the kill, as it were. Whereas those which seem to imply no glasses are from witnesses who arrived after Leonardo had already fallen.”

“There are only two possibilities, then, Napoleon. Either the dark glasses were knocked off when he fell—”

“In which case,” Solo interrupted, “they would have been picked up and taken to the mortuary with the body, one would think. And they weren’t.”

“Or else…”

“Quite. Or else … *Or else some person or persons unknown removed those glasses between the time Leonardo was hit and the arrival of the later witnesses.* What we have to do now is find out who that was and why they did it!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Questions And Answers

There was no doubt about it whatever. The redhead who ran the tie shop was a most beautiful girl. Solo and Kuryakin had never found it easier to think up questions to ask, especially as they could talk in English, which she understood.

"And this Dutchman who was shot—would you say, signorina, that he was typical of his race?" Solo asked when they had led the conversation round to the shooting.

"Dutch? Him? You must be joking!" the girl said. She undulated across to a display case where Illya was fondling a selection of cravats in amber and orange and beige.

"No, really. It's true!"

"Well, honestly," the girl said. "If he came from Holland, then I'm… "

"… a Dutchman!" Illya and Solo chorused, bursting out laughing and then looking rather sheepish.

The girl repressed a smile. "This one is rather nice, don't you think? The color's definitely *you,"* she said, sidling up to Kuryakin and picking up a length of oyster-green silk. Her voice was husky and her skin, dark above the decolletage of a white pique dress, positively glowed.

"No, but I'm interested," Solo pursued. "I believe there *is* such a thing as a national type and Leonardo was typically Dutch. Tall, big-boned, with those bland features and opaque blue eyes—"

"What d'you mean, blue!" the girl interrupted. "His eyes were brown."

"Never!"

"But they were! I noticed particularly. They had already filmed—"

"I don't see how you could tell, anyway," the agent cut in, "since he was wearing dark glasses."

"He *wasn't* wearing glasses. I tell you I particularly noticed the color of his eyes."

“Oh, well,” Solo shrugged. “It’s not important, I guess… I think I’ll take this one with the double stripe, please.”

“Yes,” Illya said, “and I’ll have the black-and-white spot and that one in turquoise and charcoal.”

“Don’t you like the oyster-green cravat?” the girl breathed.

The Russian dragged his eyes away from the tight contours of the pique dress. “Oh… yes—er—very much,” he gulped. “I’ll… I’ll have that too…”

“Thank you very much, gentlemen,” the girl said demurely. “That will be three thousand lira each for the ties, and four thousand five hundred the cravat, thirteen thousand five hundred altogether. I’m much obliged.”

“Be my guest!” Solo said, putting away his wallet and accepting the long, thin paper bags.

Out in the street, they discovered that the prognostications of Illya and the post office porter concerning the weather had been justified. Rain had begun to fall and in the warm desk street lamps trailed streamers of light through shop window reflections on the wet pavements. They were unable either to congratulate the porter, however, or question him on his memory of the murdered man, for the post office was closed and he had gone home.

The wider of the two ladies in the flower shop was nevertheless able to confirm that the unfortunate gentleman *had* in fact been wearing dark glasses; and her leaner cousin in turn corroborated this. By the time Solo had bought some cigarettes from the kiosk across the road and heard once more that Leonardo was in sunglasses “as usual”, their theory looked like being confirmed.

“Oh—and I’ll have a box of matches too, please,” the agent said as he paid.

The fat man who ran the kiosk leaned forward across the counter. “If you do not mind, *signore,*” he said, “you can get them from the blind man beside you—there, just at the foot of the steps to the post office.”

The agent raised his eyebrows.

“It is unusual, I agree,” the man explained. “Especially as here in Italy the sale of cigarettes and matches remains—as it does in France—a government monopoly, issued to the public only through licensed *tabacci.*” His shoulders heaved up in an immense shrug. “But what would you do? The poor man must earn a living. Officially, for the books, he is an employee of the kiosk. The local police are good fellows and they turn a blind eye to the fact that he sits physically outside it.”

“How apposite of them,” Solo murmured as he moved across to the stairway.

The matchseller sat with his back against the column flanking the flight and his feet stretched out in front of him. There was a grey stubble on his wizened face and his eyes were hidden behind the circular lenses of a pair of old fashioned steel-rimmed sunglasses. Below his tray, a cardboard notice announced that he had lost his sight in the service of his fatherland in North Africa and that he had no other means of support.

“*Buona sera,*” Solo said. “*Mi dia scatola di fiammiferi, per favore.*”

“*Si, signore. Quanti ne vuole?*”

“*Me ne dia due di questi*.” He picked up two of the miniature boxes and dropped some coins into the man’s seamed and dirty hand. As he turned to leave, he stumbled clumsily against Kuryakin and one of the boxes spun out of his grasp towards the blind man’s face. Instinctively, involuntarily, one of the peddler’s hands darted up protectively, was arrested in mid-flight, and then gently lowered again.

Solo retrieved the matchbox from the ground and moved away. “That’s all I wanted to know,” he murmured. “You stay here, Illya, while I fetch the car. If luck’s with us, you *won’t* have to take off again alone!”

And luck was with them. For when Solo drew the Fiat up alongside the sidewalk fifty yards down the street, Kuryakin was still lounging at the cafe-bar with one eye on the matchseller.

It was another hour before the taxi called to take the man home and they could slip into the traffic stream and follow him to a suburb on the road to Susa and Moncenis on the city’s western outskirts. There was a pantomime of finding change and getting out of the cab, and then the blind man tapped his way along a brick path and up to a door in a small cottage between a baker’s shop and an apartment building.

He fumbled for his key, twisted it in the lock, and opened the door. Once inside the musty smelling hallway, he felt to make sure the curtains were covering the window, and then threw aside his stick, switched on the light, and took off his dark glasses.

Leaning against the wall at the far end of the entrance was Napoleon Solo. And the Berretta in his hand was pointing straight at the matchseller’s heart.

The man gave a hoarse cry of alarm. His hand flew to his jacket pocket, and his eyes darted wildly from side to side.

“I wouldn’t, if I were you,” Kuryakin said softly from behind him. “Mr. Solo is an awfully good shot—and even if he missed, there’s still me.”

The wizened features twisted into a grimace of fury. “Who the devil are you?” he protested shrilly, whirling round to face the Russian. “What right have you to come bursting into a private house

“All right!” Solo rapped. “Cut it out! We’ve rumbled your nasty little game, so let’s take it from there. And, in passing, of all the mean, low, despicable schemes, faking blindness to feather your own nest really is—”

“He steals, too,” Kuryakin interrupted. “I watched while you were getting the car. He’s in a marvelous position there, at the bottom of the steps. Women leave their shopping baskets on the ground while they put coins in the stamp machines; they leave their bags down while they check their mail… who’s going to suspect a poor blind man, even if they do miss things at once? I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t pick a few pockets on the side, too.”

The matchseller’s face was contorted with rage. “Get out of here!” he snarled. “I’ll have the police on you! I’ll show you—”

Solo strode across the hall. He grasped the man’s greasy lapels. “No,” he said quietly. *“I’ll* show *you!*… Let’s have a look at your sneaky little face… I see. A partial cataract in one eye and perfectly good sight in the other. So you have to capitalize on it. Charming.” His knuckles bunched in the cheap material of the man’s suit as he raised him off the ground and thrust his face within inches of the bloodshot eyes. “All right,” he hissed. “What have you done with the dead man’s sunglasses?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” the matchseller blustered.

“When he fell, his head came to rest just by you, didn’t it? And in the general scuffle you either picked the glasses off the ground or actually took them from his nose, wasn’t that it?”

“You’re mad, both of you! I tell you I don’t—”

Solo hurled the man from him so that he crashed against the wall and slid to the floor. “Don’t give me that!” he barked. “Illya—do we have the generator in the car? I think a little electrical treatment is indicated here.”

“Certainly. It’ll be a real pleasure,” Kuryakin said, picking up his cue and moving towards the door.

“In the meantime…“Solo bent down and slapped the rat-like face once, twice, three times, four times, forehanded and backhanded, as he hauled the man to his feet. “I’ll make a start. We have all night to spend if necessary.”

“How many clips do you want?” Illya asked from the door. “Half a dozen will do, I should think. Greasy skin’s a good conductor.”

“All right, all right, all right!” The bluster changed all at once to an abject whine. “There’s no need to get all dramatic over a miserable pair of sunglasses. What did you want to go and get violent for?” Eyes glared at them malevolently over black-rimmed nails as he felt his unshaven jaw to see if it had been damaged.

“So you do have them?” Kuryakin demanded.

“Of course I do, if it’s so important to you. I don’t see the harm in it: he wasn’t going to need them any more. If I’d left them, the police’d only have pinched them. They were a nice pair too. Would’ve done a treat on me.”

“Would have?”

“Yes, would have. The silly bastard must have caught them on something as he went down. One of the lenses is splintered to hell,” the little man said viciously.

“How inconsiderate of him! What else did you steal from his body? … Do you know the penalty in Italy for violating the dead. Napoleon?”

“Whatever it is, it’s not enough. Come on, you. We want an answer.”

“There was nothing else. I swear…”

Solo moved in menacingly. The man backed off, his hands raised, his lips curled back in a snarl. “Oh, very well, curse you. There was a pocket book… it was falling out of his hip pocket. The police would have—”

“We quite understand. Of course there was no money in it.”

“No, there was not. And nothing you can do will prove there was.”

“Go and fetch it. And the sunglasses.”

“I tell you there wasn’t any Not even a hundred lira.”

“Strange and unbelievable as it may seem to you, we are not interested in the money—or the lack of it. Go and fetch them. *Now!”*

Sullenly, the man walked through into a squalid bedroom.

Beyond the tumbled grey sheets on the bed, a cheap veneer dressing table was piled with watches, belts, ties, wallets, purses, a couple of women’s handbags, cameras, even a pair of binoculars. He pulled open the top drawer and rummaged around inside it. Eventually he fished out a black calf pocket book, nearly new, and a pair of sunglasses in expensive tortoise-shell frames. The left-hand lens was, as the man had said, cracked, the smoked glass finely starred and splintered, though none of it had fallen out.

Solo held out his hand and took them. He slid the Berretta back into his pocket and opened the door. “That’s all for now,” he said. “You’re lucky. But there is one thing… I should hate to find you still outside that kiosk tomorrow, cashing in on people’s sympathy, if I happened to pass.”

Back in their hotel room, they examined their prizes. There was very little in the pocket book. The money would have vanished within minutes of the theft and the pickpocket would no doubt have plenty of blackmarket contacts for the sale of driving license, identity papers, check book and so on—the absence of which had been remarked on by the police when the body was brought in. There was, however, a miniature diary, a tiny volume with a pencil lodged in its spine and a calf cover *en suite* with the pocket book itself. And there was a collection of visiting cards, restaurant bills, stamps and other scraps of paper.

Solo glanced briefly through them and put them aside. “All these seem to be documentary evidence to support the poor guy’s expense account,” he said. “It’s things like that which make you realize…” He broke off and shook his head.

Kuryakin hadn’t heard him. He was staring at the last entry in the diary. “Listen to this,” he said slowly. “Leonardo seems to have used this just as a kind of movable memorandum pad. He doesn’t put down dates and times every day, like an engagement book. He doesn’t fill it in afterward like an ordinary diary.”

“It would hardly do, in our business, would it?” Solo asked drily.

“… But what he does do—he makes cryptic little notes to remind him of things. You know. Rent due tomorrow. Replace lamp in chandelier. Buy birthday card for G. Meet X at 3:15. Check dentist’s appointment. That sort of thing.”

“So?”

“So the last entry, for the day he died, reads simply: *Send glasses to W for repair…”*

“W for Waverly? Is that what you mean?”

“It does rather suggest itself, Napoleon.”

Solo gave a low whistle. “If that’s so, then he was on his way to send a signal to Waverly telling him the glasses were arriving, and what they were for, when he was shot,” he said. “Exactly. And presumably he was intending to pack up the glasses and send them off by another route, from another post office, later in the day.”

“I wonder if the Thrush people knew how lucky they were, getting him when they did?”

“I imagine not. They’d hired these local toughs to bump him off as quickly as possible, as soon as they discovered the list had been copied and realized it must be him—and that was the first chance they got.”

“Yes… I hate to tell you this, Illya, but they stopped using the phrase ‘bump him off’ several decades ago.”

“Rub him in, then, or whatever. But there’s one other thing that’s odd. Napoleon: an operative of Leonardo’s experience really does not need to have a written reminder to send vital information back to his headquarters, does he?”

“No, I guess he doesn’t at that. That doesn’t tie in with your knowledge of the man’s M.O.?”

“He was a very experienced, a very reliable, man. And he was working directly for me on this job. I’m certain, absolutely certain, he would only have put such an entry in that book because he meant it to be seen—by one of us.”

“You mean he was covering himself? He thought something might happen?”

“Something can always happen. Napoleon. I think he put it there as a tip-off that the glasses *were* the medium he’d used to make the hologram… just in case. And unfortunately for him, his precautions turned out to be necessary.”

Solo, picking up the sunglasses and turning them over, saw just a pair of expensive spectacles with rather large lenses, one of which was cracked. He grinned. “I hope they’re classy enough to have *exactly* the same curvature on both lenses,” he said. “Otherwise, if he happened to have used the one that’s got damaged, we’d be back to square one again!”

“You’re convinced, then?” Kuryakin asked.

“Oh yes; I’m sure you are right, Illya. There’s no doubt about it. We’ve found the treasure. All we have to do now is get it back to New York!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Tables Are Turned

Giovanna del Renzio had agreed to take Solo and Illya to the airport. The evening before, they had decided to celebrate a little and she had accompanied them to Angelo's for dinner; this time without seeing either Carlsen or the bulky man in grey! Now she was outside the hotel waiting for Illya to bring the Fiat round from the garage while Solo made a farewell telephone call to the *Commendatore.*

It was still raining, though there was blue sky over towards the mountains. The girl was wearing a dazzling white vinyl raincoat, with white patent knee boots and an absurd orange umbrella. Beneath this creaking armor of leather and plastic, she was dressed in a simple jersey suit of navy and white which set off the racy lines of her body to perfection. Her hair was set high to keep it up under the umbrella out of the rain.

"Well if we ever needed an argument in favour of Italian holidays, you're definitely it," Kuryakin said enthusiastically if ungrammatically as he loaded their two cases into the boot. Giovanna smiled warmly. "Be careful," she said. "If your precious piece of glass is in one of those…"

Before the Russian could reply. Solo had come out and was shaking hands with the girl. "I've said our goodbyes to the *Commendatore,"* he reported. "And I've also spoken to Rinaldi, my dear. He'll be quite happy if you return the car to him tomorrow. I must say it's terribly kind of you to offer to take it back. It'll save me so much trouble."

"Not at all," Giovanna said politely. "I think we ought to be on our way if you want plenty of time for the plane. The road to Caselle is very busy and it's still quite wet. Will you drive, Napoleon?"

"Okay," Solo said. "Let's go!"

They had just passed the turn-off to the Milan Autostrada when Giovanna leaned forward from the back seat and said: "This little pickpocket you told me about last night—the matchseller outside the post office: was he a member of this Thrush organization, do you think?"

“Absolutely not,” Solo said. “He was just a smalltime chiseler who happened unknowingly to have picked up something other people wanted.” He changed down and urged the Fiat past a huge truck and trailer that were spraying muddy water up from the wet road.

“But in that case,” the girl protested, “why did he take your piece of glass or whatever it was from the body of Leonardo? The pocket book I can understand; but a piece of… You never did get around to telling me just what he used to make that hologram! What *did* you take off the pickpocket last night?”

Kuryakin turned round in the front passenger seat and grinned at her. “Just that,” he said vaguely. “A piece of glass… “

“Illya!” Solo called out, peering through the streaming windshield. “I missed the sign because of that blasted motor bus! Do we take the left or the right fork here for Caselle?”

The Russian wiped condensation away from the glass with his sleeve. “Right, I think,” he said, staring in his turn. “No! No, I’m wrong. The left!”

“You were correct the first time,” the girl said from behind.

“No, no. It *is* the left. You can see the airport sign pointing that way.”

“It’s the left for Caselle, yes. But we are not going to the airport. Take the right fork and then turn right again on the road labelled Leini and Cigliano.” There was a sudden coldness and hardness in the girl’s voice that made Kuryakin swing round again and Solo flick a glance at his driving mirror.

She was sitting very erect on the edge of the seat and there was a gun in her hand.

“You’d better do as I say,” she snapped. “I know how to use this.”

Obediently, Solo hugged his nearside and took the right hand fork, steering the Fiat immediately afterward on to the secondary road the girl indicated. He sighed. “I don’t know about the pickpocket,” he said, “but I suppose you really are a member of what you called ‘this Thrush organization’?”

“Naturally. It is relatively easy for us to penetrate such loose systems as S.I.D. and M.I.6… to say nothing of the C.I.A.” The girl’s voice was scornful.

“Well, congratulations! You really are a master—perhaps I should say, rather, a mistress—of deceit and treachery!” Kuryakin said bitterly.

“Your old fashioned moral strictures leave me cold,” Giovanna del Renzio said indifferently. “But I’d rather do without the noise of you talking.” Coolly, she raised the muzzle of the gun until it was level with the Russian’s neck and pulled the trigger.

There was a sharp, coughing explosion, not very loud, and Kuryakin jerked forward and slumped against the dashboard. As though in reflex, Solo had stamped on the brakes as the gun fired. The Fiat slewed momentarily and almost stopped, sending him lurching forward against the wheel, and then resumed its course as he released the pressure on the pedal.

“I shouldn’t do that again if I were you,” the girl said grimly. “You have no need to worry. It’s only a sleep dart, similar to those you use yourselves. He’ll be back with us in less than an hour.”

“You’ve made me break my glasses,” Solo said reproachfully. He felt his chest where it had struck the steering wheel and drew out a pair of sunglasses from his breast pocket. They had tortoise-shell frames—and one of the lenses certainly was cracked.

“Put them back. You won’t need them where you’re going.”

“And that is? Back to Mr. Carlsen’s place, I presume?”

“Yes. By minor roads in case of trouble on the Autostrada. As you see, we’re already in open country. Straight over this crossroads here.”

“And just what is to stop me,” Solo demanded, “from switching off the engine and braking to a halt in the first town we come to? We’re bound to pass *some* villages on the way: it’s more than fifty kilometres to Buronzo.”

Giovanna del Renzio leaned over the back of Illya’s seat, keeping the gun trained warily on Solo, and pushed the Russian’s unconscious body down below the line of windscreen and windows. “Use your mirror,” she said. “The Cadillac behind is Mr. Carlsen’s—and in a minute a Lancia will pull out ahead of you from a layby. Lala Eriksson will be driving. As a foreigner with no papers, do you think any country policeman will believe you against the word of two car loads of local residents? Besides which, I should shoot one of these darts at you before you could say anything… and don’t think we couldn’t, between us, think up some convincing explanation!”

Solo shrugged. The rain had stopped completely and sunshine was raising steam from the drying road as it curved between meadows of silvery green. Half a kilometer ahead, the familiar Lancia convertible, now with its

roof raised, nosed out into the road from under a row of trees and took up its station ahead of him.

“May one ask the point of this—er—maneuver?” Solo enquired.

“Don’t be foolish, Mr. Solo. You know as well as I do. When we get to Carlsen’s house you will tell us what it is that you took from this pickpocket and, if it is here, we will destroy it; if not, we shall get it and then destroy it.”

“And if we don’t tell you?”

“You will. One of you will. There are ways and means at that house, believe me. Round this corner we enter the main road to Chivasso for a few hundred meters, and then we turn left off it again. Be ready for a sharp right and then left… And remember I shall be ready for anything else!”

Without taking her eyes from him, the girl laid her arm along the shelf below the car’s back window and gave the thumbs-up sign to the Cadillac which was purring along close behind.

Half an hour later, they rolled in convoy along the road where Lala Eriksson and Illya had been forced into the hedge by Solo. Only this time there was no rescuer roaring up behind them between the thickets of cane.

Soon they came to a crossroads and Solo recognized part of the route he had taken on foot when he had escaped from Carlsen’s domain.

Two kilometers later, the Lancia turned in under an archway piercing the high wall of a gatehouse and they were in the driveway he recalled so well. The steel grille gates swung wide as Lala Eriksson sounded her horn, remained open as the three cars drove through, and then slowly shut to remake its electrical circuit with the wire mesh fence inside the wall.

Solo caught a glimpse of a pair of dogs eyeing the convoy, and then they were past the poplar trees and circling the shrubbery in front of the house.

They pulled up below the terrace with a rustle of gravel.

La la Erikssen, slim and dark in a green trouser suit, was climbing from the Lancia’s driving seat. Carlsen, his fat face split into a travesty of a welcoming smile, was standing at the front of the steps with one of his torpedoes on either side. And from the Cadillac behind, the manservant and three more gunmen descended.

Giovanna del Renzio slid across the back seat of the Fiat and opened the door. She got out on to the driveway and jerked open the passenger door. Illya Kuryakin slumped inertly to the gravel.

The girl gestured sharply with her gun and Solo in his turn pressed the catch of his door and stepped out of the car.

“Mr. Solo!” Carlsen exclaimed effusively. “How *nice* to see you again. Let us hope that this time our hospitality will not bore you so much that you feel you have to leave… Giovanna my dear, we are indebted to you for so kindly bringing our friends here. So that they are spared the tedious preliminaries to the entertainment we have prepared for them, perhaps you would be good enough to make Mr. Solo comfortable for the time being, eh?”

Too late, the agent swung round. He saw the snigger on the face of one of the guards; he saw the girl’s knuckles whiten on the trigger of the gun that was pointing at him; and then he saw the spurt of flame from the muzzle that whitened, too, and spread and spread until it reached the farthest horizon.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Solo And Illya Take To the Air

There was a man with a sledgehammer inside Illya Kuryakin's skull, trying to beat his way out. The blows became stronger and stronger, reverberating agonizingly inside the steel walls, until at last the hammerhead burst its way through at a weak point and daylight came flooding in.

The Russian blinked his eyes. It wasn't daylight at all, he saw, but the illumination of an unshaded electric bulb hanging from a flex about ten feet above his head. He was in fact lying on his back on the floor and he was—he flexed muscles experimentally—scientifically bound, spread-eagled to four rings set in the concrete. If he twisted his head, he could see the iron circlets and the wire which bit into his flesh and attached him to them. He could also see to his surprise (he craned his neck to make sure) that he was completely naked. He could feel the cool, gritty texture of the cement floor against his calves, his haunches and his shoulder blades.

As far as he could, he looked around the room. It was more like a cellar, really, about fifteen feet square and completely empty except for an apparatus that looked rather like a hi-fi set, and another which seemed to comprise a tubular steel tripod with a T-shaped crosspiece and a length of rubber tubing leading to it.

There was one other thing, though, a few feet away from him, he could see the bare body of Napoleon Solo similarly spread-eagled between four iron rings set into the floor. Kuryakin tested the efficiency of his bonds with his wrists and fingers. The wire was of the variety used to make netting for chicken runs, and it had been fastened by a master. It was not knotted but twisted into place, and the tightening had been effected either by a packaging machine or by someone who was an artist with pliers. Even if he could have reached the joins, Illya could have done little to free himself. Nothing short of a pair of wire-cutters or a half hour session with another set of pliers would have any effect on them. Struggling would only chafe

away the flesh from his wrists and ankles; and he was already uncomfortable enough, stretched out to the full extent of his spread legs and arms. And there was a draught cutting across the floor like a knife from somewhere behind. He decided to try and arouse Solo. “Napoleon!” he hissed in a piercing whisper. “Napoleon! Are you with me?”

There was a deep chuckle from the dead area behind his head. “I’m afraid Mr. Solo is still unconscious,” a voice said. “But I am always pleased to talk… and we haven’t had the pleasure of meeting before, Mr. Kuryakin. The name is Carlsen… Supreme Council Member for Southern Europe.”

Illya twisted his head this way and that until eventually he was able to see the bulky figure of Solo’s kidnapper seated comfortably on a chair behind and between the two of them. “We’ve used this line before, this week,” he said; “but I’m afraid you have the advantage of me.”

“And I intend to keep it,” Carlsen said genially. “You—either you or Mr. Solo, that is—are going to tell me exactly what it was that the tiresome Leonardo used to make his hologram. And when you have told me, we shall destroy it. And then the hologram will remain forever useless, and I can carry on with the work your people have interrupted.”

“Having destroyed us, too, no doubt?”

“That depends upon your cooperation. Certainly we shall take steps to ensure that you will both be—shall we say—forever useless too!… But first the matter of the hologram.

“I have no doubt that you have been subjected to the usual U.N.C.L.E. subliminal conditioning. Mr. Solo hasn’t. And we expect, therefore, that he will crack first. Let me explain the method we’ll use.”

He rose and walked slowly around Solo to the two pieces of apparatus on the cellar floor. “Here we have,” he said, touching the tripod, “an item of homely garden equipment. Doubtless you are familiar with it. Through the rubber tube, water flows under pressure into the crosspiece, revolving it about its central axis, which is balanced on delicate bearings. At the same time, as it swings round, water emerges from a multitude of tiny holes along its length in the form of a fine spray. Since the pressure of the water can be varied, both speed and direction of crosspiece—and thus the distance and the course traced by the spray—are in effect random. And a tripod properly set up can water a fair section of garden very thoroughly in quite a short time.”

The big man moved across to the second piece of equipment and stood with one hand resting on it, looking quizzically down at Kuryakin.

"That is of course only of academic interest," he said. "But with this apparatus we come into the realm of practical applications. And all this is—when you come down to it—is a kind of electrical generator." He paused and added significantly: "And water is a perfect conductor…"

The draught behind the Russian increased. There was the sound of footsteps, and tall, white boots creaked into his field of vision.

"Quite a pretty pair!" Giovanna del Renzio said, staring up and down the trussed figures of the two agents. "But how droll they look, spread out on the floor like that…"

"They will look more droll still, when our little experiment begins," Carlsen replied suavely. "Perhaps, my dear, you would like to explain?"

"It's quite simple really," the girl said to Illya. "As you heard, water is a perfect conductor—so if we connect the out put of the generator to the spray, the water droplets, as they whirl round, will carry the charge… so long as there is continuous contact, drop by drop, back to the metal of the crosspiece. Anybody on whom the spray falls when such a contact exists will therefore receive a shock, of course—unless or until the particles of water separate, when the circuit is broken.

"Since the speed and direction of the spray is indeterminate, as is the frequency of electrical contact within it, the amount of time a person under the spray would in fact be receiving shocks is also totally random."

"The point of all this," Carlsen put in, "is that in most forms of—er—persuasion, the person to be persuaded can see the hot iron or the stroke of the whip or whatever it is on the way… and can therefore in some manner tense himself, prepare to tighten up in anticipation of the pain. But imagine—as I am sure somebody in your position, Mr. Kuryakin, easily could!—the victim in the dark awaiting the arbitrary movements of a spray such as this… knowing that, even when the water touches him, it *may* not carry a charge. And that the charge itself, and therefore the amount of pain it produces, is also infinitely variable. Infinitely, Mr. Kuryakin!"

"It may seem unduly bizarre or complex," the girl added, "but the system has been perfected to save time, really. The disintegration of self control actually does arrive much more quickly, I can assure you. It's rather like the old Chinese dripping tap torture, with uncertainty thrown in to add a… logical… element."

“Yes, yes,” Carlsen said. “And in the line of labor saving, like all modern equipment. And in that connection, of course, I must not neglect to point out that, as the floor becomes covered with a thin layer of water itself, a charge carried by spray falling on it can be transmitted to the body even though the spray may not in fact touch it. If you think a little you will see that this is why we use iron rings and wire for the purpose of securing you. Both conduct admirably.”

“If your people spent less time on the melodrama and more on planning, you might be a little more successful,” Illya said.

“We shall see how successful we are in a little while. A very little while, I should think,” Carlsen replied. “Your headquarters are mad to send you against us. How can your puny little efforts triumph against our computer? Mr. Solo is not yet with us, my dear; but I think we might venture a little trial run, eh?”

The girl nodded. Keeping her eyes on Illya, she walked over to a main riser culminating in a tap from which the rubber tube feeding the sprinkler ran. Slowly she turned the brass wheel opening the faucet.

For a moment nothing happened. And then, with a sudden hiss, the crosspiece jerked into motion like a watery firework. From each end, a fan of spray feathered out, describing a moving spiral of mist in the air. And as the apparatus revolved more and more rapidly, these two, plus the smaller issues along the length of the rotating bar, coalesced to form a single arc of droplets which scythed this way and that in the bright electric light beneath the cellar ceiling. Initially, Illya saw the figure-of-eight patterns the damp made on the dusty floor.

And then a trailing end of the douche fell once, twice and—after a slight delay—a third time coldly over the gooseflesh on his skin. By the time he had caught his breath, the whole floor was shining uniformly wet.

Giovanna del Renzio was attaching some piece of equipment to the tap. “This,” Carlsen said, raising his voice slightly over the swishing of the sprinkler, “will vary the pressure of the water reaching the crosspiece automatically, so the pattern of its fall will start to vary also. We’ll let you watch for a few minutes before we go out and turn off the light; but first let me show you the electrical side of the business!” He wheeled the generator closer to the sprinkler, drew on a pair of rubber gloves, and made a connection.

The water was falling across Kuryakin's flesh every now and then, sometimes in a fine veil, sometimes with a certain amount of force. And now, suddenly, one time, the unmistakable tingle of a mild shock whipped across his belly and up over his shoulder to his right arm.

Carlsen was turning a rheostat control on the generator.

Again water swept over the Russian. Once more it approached, wavered, went away, returned—and a violent spasm arched his body up from the iron rings as what felt like a red-hot whip scalded across his thigh. A hoarse cry of pain was torn from his lips. A few feet away, Napoleon Solo moaned slightly and shifted against his bonds.

Giovanna del Renzio's bright plastic raincoat was shiny with water. Water dripped from the ceiling, washed across the floor and streamed down the cellar walls. Kuryakin could feel it clammy against his back. But there was no more water in the air. The girl had switched the apparatus off.

Carlsen, his suit dark with moisture, spoke from the far side of the room. "We're going to leave you now," he said. "Some time during the next hour the lights will go off. And at indeterminate times subsequently, the sprinkler will be turned on—and off—sometimes with current, sometimes without.

"You have already had a taste both of the mild and of the fairly severe current… although, of course, we can make it stronger still if we wish. We do not wish to keep on interrupting you with tedious requests as to whether or not you are ready to speak. So every sound you make will be taped, and at intervals we shall play the tapes back. When we judge from the noises that you are—er—desirous of further conversation, we shall return. But not before."

He was about to turn and go, shepherding the girl before him, when Lala Eriksson appeared in the doorway. She had changed out of her green suit and was wearing slacks and a turtle neck sweater in black. There was a slight smile on her face and her eyes were shining.

"Lala!" Carlsen sounded surprised. "I know we promised you the first trick, but I thought we'd agreed that a half hour to reflect—"

"I know, I know," the girl interrupted. "But the more I think of it, the more I'm inclined to the view that too much time in the light is a bad thing. It may give them the time to steel themselves, you know. And we simply cannot afford to let them do that."

"Very well then. At the beginning, anyway, you're the boss."

He turned back to Kuryakin with a sardonic smile. “For you, at any rate, the night starts now. Other plans will be carried out as outlined.” He switched out the light, ushered the two girls into the passage, went out himself and closed the door.

In the sudden intense darkness, Illya lay spread-eagled on the wet floor and wondered desperately what he could do. There was nothing. His bonds were unburstable; since he was naked, there was nothing he could reach or hope to adapt from his clothes that might help; Napoleon Solo was still unconscious—and even if he could have talked, it would have been useless, as everything they said would have been taped. He imagined, from the scrap of conversation he had heard, that they were to take it in turns to actuate the combined water-electric torture. There were probably controls just outside the door, and Lala Eriksson would be at them now. How long, he wondered, would they be able to hold out against the combined onslaught of pain and uncertainty?

Not too long, probably. But whereas, as Carlsen had surmised, he was conditioned, Solo was not. And when he himself broke and wanted to talk, the things he said would be things implanted subconsciously in his mind by a New York psychiatrist attached to the Command. When Solo broke and they injected the drugs, he would simply tell them what they wanted to know.

It was the uncertainty and not the pain that would break them, though. Carlsen had been right, damn him! Stretched there as humiliatingly as a specimen on a slide, the flesh tensed for the cold caress of spray that might or might not come, the shock that might or might not come with it… it was hardly a situation that called for rejoicing!

Water hissed suddenly into action as the sprinkler jingled into movement. A wedge of light opened into the dark and then vanished as the door opened and closed. In the instant of illumination, he saw Lala Eriksson slip into the cellar. She had put on a black raincoat over her slacks and she was busy about the generator and the sprinkler.

Cold mist trailed over Kuryakin’s legs, but there was no shock, mild or violent—that time.

A pencil of light from a pocket torch lanced the gloom. Footsteps splashed across the cellar floor and stopped somewhere just behind him. Again and again the spray washed across his body. But there was still no shock.

The girl was on one knee by the iron ring to which his right hand was attached. He heard the rustle of the raincoat as she moved. When he craned his head over his shoulder, he could see highlights sliding over the contours of the polished proof material sheathing her body.

An instant later, there was a sharp snick and his hand was free.

"What the devil… ?" Illya began.

"Shhhhhh!" The girl's whisper was urgent. *"Don't forget the tape!… And you're supposed to be getting electric shocks, so if you could groan a bit it would help."*

The Russian uttered a hoarse cry and then another. The light beam stabbed down towards his feet. Again the girl crouched, a strange figure shining wetly in the diffuse light as the spray twisted this way and that. And then he was completely free, sitting up damply on the cold floor, trying to massage life back into his limbs.

Another three minutes, and they were manhandling the unconscious body of Napoleon Solo out of the door and into a dimly lit passageway. Kuryakin gave a final realistic cry of pain and closed the cellar door.

"We'll be all right for ten or fifteen minutes," the girl whispered. "Even if they do listen to the tape so early, they'll just think I've left a gap in the 'treatment'; they'll be expecting that."

"I don't wish to seem ungrateful—but what the hell goes on?"

Lala Eriksson grinned, her face suddenly impish in the dim light. "Like Giovanna, I belong to the S.I.D.," she said. "But whereas she was using the S.I.D. as a cover for her membership of Thrush, I'm doing exactly the opposite—using my Thrush association to mask the fact that I'm with the S.I.D.! Giovanna doesn't know I belong, of course; but we've been watching her… and Mr. Carlsen's unsavory menage… for months!"

Kuryakin tried to laugh, but he was shivering so much with cold and with reaction that all he managed was a kind of steam-engine stutter.

"I'm so sorry!" The girl was all contrition. "You must be perished. Your clothes are here in this cupboard. Mr. Solo's too. I don't suppose he'll be coming round yet, will he?"

"I doubt it. He must have been knocked out a full hour after I was, and I've only been conscious quite a short while. Since Carlsen came in."

Lala bit her lip. "That's going to make it awkward. We've got very little time, you see. Any time after the next ten minutes, Carlsen or Giovanna may realize you're not in the cellar—and that tips them off that it's me

that’s responsible. If we could possibly get Solo unseen to a car, though, and I could bluff my way through the gates before we were spotted, we *might…”*

She broke off abruptly and, signalling the Russian to help, began feverishly to dress Solo in the clothes she took from the cupboard. Illya felt anxiously in the breast pocket as they eased the jacket over his shoulders. The sunglasses—the vital link in the chain that would strangle Thrush’s plans for Europe—were still there! Hurriedly, he put on his own clothes. Together, they manhandled the unconscious man up a flight of stairs, through a doorway and along a short passage. At the double doors which blocked off its end, the girl held up her hand for silence. “My car is just outside here,” she whispered. “If we can get him into it without being spotted, we might just make the gates and crash through before anyone realizes… “

Kuryakin eased back the catch and inched one of the doors open while Lala supported Solo’s sagging figure. Gradually, the hairline of daylight widened until finally he could peer through into the open air.

The doors gave out on to a cobbled yard beside the garage at the back of the house. On the far side of the yard, a high wall sheltered the kitchen garden; behind it were the stables—underneath which, presumably, was the cellar in which they had been imprisoned—and at the front, the drive ran past the long, low elevation of the house itself. The Lancia convertible was parked about five yards from the doors, with a clump of oleanders masking it from windows in the house.

But between them and the car loomed the broad shoulders of one of the guards. He was standing with his back to them, his machine pistol at the ready, staring along the drive.

The Russian motioned the girl to come and look. Gently, she lowered Solo to the floor and joined him at the door. She gave one comprehensive glance at the scene outside, sketched a brief pantomime with one hand, and then jerked the door noisily open, “Brockman!” she called. “Here!”

The guard turned slowly round. His brutish face creased into a frown. *“Was ist?”* he demanded suspiciously, approaching the door.

“One of the prisoners below,” Lala said agitatedly. “He’s… come and look. Quick!”

The big man snicked back the safety catch on his weapon, bent his head and strode through the doorway. Lala was already at the head of the stair

beckoning.

Kuryakin had obediently cached himself in the deep shadows behind the open door. Now, as soon as the guard had passed through, he stole up behind the man, poised on one foot, and slammed his other heel down as hard as he could on the butt of the F.N. where it protruded between the torpedo's arm and body.

The big pistol clattered to the ground as the gunman whirled round with a snarl of astonished rage.

Before he could voice his alarm, Kuryakin had danced in close, his forearm held across his chest, his fingers extended. Like a cobra striking, the flat of the hand darted out once, twice, in a deadly *karate* chop to the guard's throat. The man staggered. He uttered a strangled grunt—and he would certainly not be able to cry for help for some minutes!—but he was tough. He did not fall. Choking, he rushed at the slender Russian with outstretched arms and seized him in a bear hug. Illya tried every dirty fighting trick he knew. He butted the man's nose with his forehead, he stamped on his toe, he hacked his shin, he brought up one knee. But the torpedo was unbudgeable. Purple in the face, wheezing, he merely increased the pressure.

Inexorably, the arms tightened around Kuryakin like steel bands. His spine felt as though it was about to snap. His own arms, pinioned to his sides in that vice-like embrace, were seized with cramp.

It was when his senses had begun to reel that he resorted to the oldest of all tricks and went abruptly limp.

With a grunt of satisfaction, the guard relaxed his grip enough to let Kuryakin slide down within his grasp. And immediately his elbows were free the agent coiled and uncoiled like a tempered spring. With bunched fists, he slammed a left and a right with piston-like precision to the man's unprotected belly. And then all at once the rest of him was free….

The purple face paled to a strange and livid green, the remainder of the breath wheezed from the lungs, and the guard careened over, leaned against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. Kuryakin stood over him and completed the treatment with a couple of quick rabbit punches to the neck. "Shall I tie him?" he asked the girl. She had been hovering on the fringe of the short struggle, unable to decide whether or hot to intervene.

She shook her head. "We haven't time. We'll be discovered anyway before he regains consciousness. Come on… every moment counts… "

Illya darted to the doors, glanced around outside to make sure that the coast was clear, and then they picked up Solo and waddled towards the car. They were within two yards of the nearside door when footsteps crunched on gravel just beyond the oleanders.

Like lightning, they dropped U.N.C.L.E.'s Chief Enforcement Officer to the ground behind a border of lavender, and crouched down themselves behind the screen of pink and red-flowered bushes.

Carlsen and Giovanna del Renzio came into sight beyond the car, walking fast and talking animatedly. They were heading for the cellar door.

"… can't understand what's come over her," the man was saying, "for I distinctly told her, when I allowed her to take the first shift, that I wanted the current switched on after five minutes and then left on for some considerable time—those were my exact words—on the initial session."

"Yes," the girl said. "And it's at least seven minutes since we heard so much as a groan. I can't imagine what all that whispering was about…"

The double doors opened and closed behind them.

Lala Eriksson was on her feet. Her face was white. "Blast!" she hissed. "They must have been listening to the tape, live, all the time. We've about thirty seconds before they raise the alarm. Let's go!"

Bundling Solo unceremoniously into the back, they piled into the Lancia and the girl twisted the starter key. The motor caught and they were away with a crisp snarl of exhaust and a shriek of tires on the shiny cobbles. As they swung wide into the driveway circling the house, Illya looked back over his shoulder and saw Carlsen, closely followed by the girl, burst out of the doors leading to the cellar.

There was something in the man's hand. A moment later smoke blossomed three times from the muzzle of an automatic and a slug hummed over the agent's head, close enough for him to feel the wind of its passing. As they screamed round the bend to the front of the house, the Thrush chief began running back towards the cellar doors.

"He'll be telephoning the gatehouse," the girl said. "Hold tight!"

They rocketed around the shrubbery, scattering gravel, and roared on to the main drive. For two hundred meters, Lala gave the Lancia its head, and then, as they entered the straight leading to the gates after swinging left, right and left again through the poplars, she braked the car down to a normal speed with repeated applications of the hand lever. "Can't afford to be seen in an obvious hurry," she panted. "They might get suspicious."

Beside her, holding a rug over Solo's unconscious body on the back seat, Kuryakin lived and died through every second of their 20 mph approach. There was a gunman lounging against the bole of a tree near the mesh gates, and he could see two others over on the far side of the lawns.

When she was fifty yards away, Lala gave a single sharp toot on the horn. Just before they got there, the iron frames began slowly to swing away. Illya could see through the window of the gatehouse the man who was twirling the wheel operating them—and he could see too, as in some nightmare pantomime, the operator's free hand reaching for a telephone which was presumably ringing….

The girl changed down with a burst of revs. The Lancia surged forward —and in the same instant, Kuryakin saw the astonished face of the operator, the frantic lunge he made for the wheel.

As they drew level, the gates halted their outwards swing and began rapidly to close again. The car was almost through when the right hand one slammed into the bodywork, scraped along the wing with a shower of sparks and screeched off the nearside rear quarter. The Lancia shuddered, seemed for a moment to stagger in its tracks, and then resumed its course as the girl's slim wrists expertly corrected the misalignment.

A moment later, they were bellowing through the archway piercing the gatehouse. Lala swung the car broadside on into the lane with a shrill scream of tires and they howled back along the route to Turin.

Machine-gun fire stammered a farewell before they were far down the road. The driving mirror vanished in a shower of splinters, a ricochet zinged off the chrome strip lining the wing, and there were several heavy thuds as the lid of the boot was holed. Then they were out of range.. and Kuryakin was able to look back over the Lancia's tail and see across the flat sweeps of meadow through which the road looped the strength of the pursuit.

There were two cars quite close behind them, the Cadillac and Solo's borrowed Fiat, with a third whose roof he could not identify several hundred yards further back.

In convoy like this they burned up the quiet afternoon countryside between Buronzo and Ivrea. Lala tried everything she knew; but no matter how perilously she cornered on the limit, no matter how much bhp she coaxed from the willing front-drive power unit on the straight, she was unable to shake off Carlsen's men.

Then, on a long stretch of road arrowing across the plain beneath the poplars without a corner in sight, the big American car crept inexorably up on them. There were men leaning from its open windows, and soon over the boom of exhausts the sharper note of pistol fire split the air.

"They must be mad—shooting on an open road in public!" Kuryakin gasped. "You'd think they'd wait until they had us cornered somewhere."

The girl shook her head as she weaved the convertible from side to side. "It doesn't matter to them," she said. "Don't you see? Carlsen will be in the clear. You can bet he's not in the lead car. The Cadillac crew are all torpedoes—kind of like a *kamikaze* unit. The only thing that's important is that they destroy us, and with us the hologram glass. They'll try to shoot, bomb, force a crash, anything, no matter who else they involve, no matter who sees them do it. They'll worry about that afterwards."

"Will they succeed?"

"Not on this road. It gets twisty again after this next corner. But it's the outskirts of Turin, with the traffic jams and the lights, that worry me."

The Russian glanced back at the pursuing cars again. "All right; we scrap Turin," he said. "Tell me: are those NATO maneuvers still going on in the Val d'Aosta? It's straight ahead from here, isn't it?"

"Yes they are and yes it is. But it's another fifty kilometers."

"Have you enough gas? And could you keep them off all the way?"

"If we keep to the secondary roads," the girl said. "And naturally I know the dispositions of the army units fairly well. What have you in mind?"

Kuryakin told her.

A little less than forty minutes later, they were bumping along a dirt road undulating across a countryside scored with tank tracks. Somewhere to their right there was a cannonading of artillery, and behind, the sporadic rattle of shots marked the progress of Carlsen's convoy along the track.

Solo had regained consciousness. Owlishly, he stared out over the Lancia's tail, loosing off an occasional shot at the Cadillac from the Berretta, which had unaccountably still been in his jacket pocket.

Lala drove boldly past notices proclaiming in red lettering on white boards that the way was prohibited, that it was mined, that it was dangerous, and that it was army property subject to artillery fire. She skirted a hutted camp, drove past two astonished sentries in boxes, and sent a group of officers leaping for the hedgerow as she careered past a staff car drawn

up by the roadside. Eventually, after looking anxiously around, she steered the convertible into a space below a clump of pine trees and stopped. The Cadillac was laboring up a hill two hundred yards behind them, and the other cars were not yet in sight.

"Quick!" she cried. "Over there, beyond the Nissens! I'll hold them off from here while you run!"

"I only hope the equipment in the *Commendatore's* car is as good as that in ours. In theirs, rather!" said Solo. "Equipment?"

"I left a homing device in the Fiat," Solo grinned. "I rang the old man before we left Turin and told him the wavelength. He promised to keep a few kilometers away as long as it was transmitting. He shouldn't be far off."

"I hope not," Lala Eriksson said."Now run! Quick!" She opened the boot of the Lancia, took out a Mannlicher rifle, loaded it, and settled down behind the car's bonnet to fire at the Cadillac. At the first shot, the big sedan stopped and men disgorged on either side to seek shelter behind bushes.

A moment later, bullets were zipping through the leaves above their heads as the girl's fire was returned with interest. The Fiat pulled up behind the American car and its driver and passengers fanned out through the underbrush in an obvious attempt to outflank her. The third vehicle had stopped some way down the track.

Solo had completely regained his usual alert wakefulness now. He dropped one hand on the girl's shoulder as she reloaded. "Okay, this is it," he said. "Thank you, bless you—and good luck…"

Kuryakin flashed her one of his rare smiles. "Thank goodness I remembered they were testing these things, and that you knew exactly where they were," he said. "It's a sick wind that doesn't blow somebody well."

Lala Eriksson laughed. "An ill wind, Illya! Look! For Heaven's sake, *go* while I still have some ammunition. I'll be all right. Really."

Together the two agents plunged through the bushes, swerving wildly to avoid the Thrush fire, and dashed down an incline to a row of Nissen huts behind which a line of half a dozen strange machines were drawn up. Each one had a seat with safety straps, a control panel, some kind of motor, and four vertical tubes about a foot in diameter at the corners. Above them, rotor blades projected from a short shaft rising from the motor housing.

Solo drew the splintered sunglasses from his breast pocket and put them on, “What on earth?” he began. “They look like miniature tractors under umbrellas that have been blown inside out!”

“One man helicopters, partly conventional, partly jet,” Illya explained briefly. “They’re trying them out for extra-short-range communication. If we can evade the bullets, they’ll get us to Caselle in time for the evening plane… “

Feverishly, they zigzagged across the clearing and began strapping themselves in. Then, as the Russian called instructions, men in olive green battledress ran from the huts, shouting, and there was a burst of rifle fire from the top of the slope they had just run down.

With a sudden roar of power, the motors caught. The unwieldy machines bounced on the ground, hovered, and then rose astonishingly, straight up and over the trees. “Just in time,” Illya shouted. “Look! Lala’s still firing from the Lancia, and the men from the Cadillac are pinning her down. But the Fiat crew beyond—the ones shooting at us!—are in for a surprise!” He pointed down.

As they soared two hundred feet above the ground, the scene below lay revealed as clearly and as simply as the models in an army sand-table exercise… the scarred convertible shielding the girl with her rifle; the professional gunmen deployed around the Cadillac, now pockmarked with bullet holes; the four killers from the Fiat, kneeling, firing up at the helicopters; the army platoon from the Nissen huts advancing warily up the scrub-covered slope to see what was going on.

Two ridges away, the ground was alive with men moving between the pines as the genuine maneuvers continued, unaware of the drama being played out in their midst. The third car in the Thrush cavalcade, the one carrying Carlsen, had turned round and was heading back towards Buronzo. By the remaining quartet of helicopters, a fat sergeant in uniform was standing with his mouth open, shaking his fists at the sky. And on the far side of the slope on which the Thrush men were staked out, hidden from the gunmen but clearly visible from the viewpoint of the airborne agents, six police cars had halted on a parallel track as their crews fanned out to take the gangsters from above and behind,

“There you are, you see!” Kuryakin yelled again above the clatter of the rotors. “The *Commendatore* made it, after all!” But from Solo’s helicopter there was no reply. One of the men in the Fiat must have been an

uncommonly good marksman, or unusually lucky, for a stray shot had creased the agent’s temple, leaving a scarlet furrow across the skin and plunging him into unconsciousness for the second time in two hours.

And that was not all. The slug that had knocked out Solo had scored a second and more valuable bull.

In its trajectory, it had passed clean through an eyepiece of the sunglasses and shattered forever the remaining lens of the damaged pair…

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Glass— Handle With Care

“There are two things I do not entirely understand from your report,” Alexander Waverly said to Solo and Kuryakin. “In the first place, why did you decide to secrete a homing device in your car when, so far as you knew, you were driving straight to the airport to catch a plane for New York? Had you in fact reason to suspect the young woman at that time?”

“Oh, yes,” Solo replied. “Look: my car was sabotaged when I left Rinaldi’s laboratory. That had to be somebody connected with the S.I.D., or somebody who had access to S.I.D. information: nobody at Carlsen’s house could possibly have known I was going there. Then we met the del Renzio girl just after we had nearly been run down in the street. She could have fingered us there. Again, it was she who suggested we ate at Angelo’s—and the gangster in the next booth was the man who fixed the lift at Leonardo’s apartment. Only Giovanna knew that we were on our way there. She must either have tipped him off or made sure that he overheard the crucial part of our conversation.”

“Also,” Illya added, “when I overheard Carlsen talking to that same gangster, he made a great point of the fact that we were ‘very well covered’—so well that it was unnecessary to try and kill us any more! We had just met Giovanna: if she was doing the covering, they would certainly not need to have outside help, for she was in on all our plans… the men we saw in the street were not Carabinieri or S.I.D agents at all, but covering agents from Thrush.”

“Exactly. It had to be her,” Solo said. “I borrowed a car and someone fixed a bomb in it. She knew the number of the borrowed car. We were attacked in an arcade on our way to a meeting with her. Only she would have known where we were coming from, and therefore the route we would take.”

“I see. That answers my second question, then,” Waverly said. “I was going to ask why you happened to have concealed from her the fact that the

sunglasses were the medium Leonardo had used for his hologram. Obviously, if you suspected her, that would be the last thing you'd reveal… Miss Eriksson, though—she, I imagine, was a surprise to you?"

"A most agreeable one!" the two agents said together.

Waverly smiled. "Fortunately she is quite all right. I spoke to the *Commendatore* by radio-telephone this morning. His men moved in and cleaned up the gunmen just after you took off. Carlsen himself and the girl were in the third car and they got away… but the rest are safely under lock and key."

They were standing in a corner of one of the second-floor laboratories in the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York. At the other end of the room, white-coated assistants were helping the Chief Technician to set up apparatus on a long bench. Lieutenant Trevitt, who had been listening to this exchange without speaking, now grinned at Illya. "Seems like our little escape on the street here was only an appetizer for what you were going to go through!" he said. "What I want to know though—how in hell did you manage to persuade a one-man chopper to fly to that airport when the pilot was unconscious? Telepathy?"

It was Solo's turn to smile. He tapped the sticking plaster on his forehead. "It's pretty rugged in there!" he said. "We're a hard-headed family, you know. There was no mystery: the helicopter just continued on its course until I regained consciousness. Illya was flying alongside, yelling… but I woke up before he'd plucked up the nerve to change planes in mid-air!"

"There is a Russian proverb I could quote…" Kuryakin began with mock wrath, when the Chief Technician called that everything was ready. The four men moved across to the bench.

Solo saw a ruby laser similar to the one he had watched at Rinaldi's laboratory, a hologram plate in a movable clamp—and, between them in a complicated cradle of adjustable jaws, the battered sunglasses to get which they had gone through so much. "It's a million to one chance, I should say," he mused, staring at the chipped side-piece, the one empty frame and the splintered lozenge of tinted glass in the other. "Surely a lens that's cracked and starred like that *cannot* pass light through it in the same way as an undamaged one?" "You're worrying needlessly, Mr. Solo," the Chief Technician said. "We carried out a few experiments before you came down. Look…" He turned a switch and plunged the room into darkness.

A pink glow suffused the bench as the laser hummed into life. Rose-colored fingers manipulated the clamps, turning the sunglasses this way and that… and suddenly, as absurdly as a conjurer producing huge flags from an empty glass, the meaningless blobs of the hologram plate vanished and they saw floating in three dimensions before them a piece of foolscap paper covered from margin to margin in single-spaced red and black typing.

The list of Thrush members-designate in Europe had been decoded at last!

"It was the *starred* lens he had used all the time, you see!" the Chief Technician said. "I guess it was the nearest he could get, optically, to frosted glass in the time at his disposal… the plain one was nothing to do with it!"

Waverly was at the phone. "For God's sake send a photographer up to the optics lab at once," he said excitedly. "Holography may be the latest in scientific discoveries—but sunglasses can get broken and I shan't be happy until I have that list on an old fashioned photographic plate!"

Illya smiled affectionately. "And when the flash has flashed," he said, "I guess Napoleon and I can get out for a well-earned rest!"

The Head of Policy and Operations stared at him. He jammed a pipe upside down into his mouth. "Rest!" he snapped, "What do you mean—rest! Carlsen and Giovanna del Renzio are still at large. The four people who kidnapped Mr. Solo have yet to be brought to justice. Lieutenant Trevitt has a line on the man whose car was used in the snatch—and through him on the owner of the private plane which flew Solo from Johnstown to Italy. The man and woman who impersonated Del Florio and his assistant have to be tracked down, and so does the rifleman who murdered the witness in the precinct house." He took the pipe from his mouth and glared at his two most trusted agents. "Why, gentlemen," he said, "this case has only just *started!"*

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